

The Politics of Education and Learning in Vietnam

Contributions to a Theory of Embedded Accountabilities

PE 10

Jonathan D. London and Bich-Hang Duong

Abstract

This paper locates many of the most important strengths and weaknesses in Vietnam's education system in the politics of education and in features of the country's education system's societal embedding. By the politics of education, we mean the relations of power and authority and of domination, contestation, cooperation, and accommodation that shape the functioning of the education system as an institutional field. By the societal embeddedness, we refer to the system's interdependent relation with its broader social and institutional environment. Understanding these elements of Vietnam's education system is of vital importance for efforts to improve education systems' performance in Vietnam and beyond.

The Politics of Education and Learning in Vietnam: Contributions to a Theory of Embedded Accountabilities

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BOET	Bureau of Education and Training (District level)
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
DOET	Department of Education and Training (Province level)
FFS	Fees for Service
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOVN	Government of Vietnam
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDU	Service delivery unity
SOE	State owned enterprise
SEDS	Socioeconomic Development Strategy

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1. EXPLORING THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BASES OF AN EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE DETERMINANTS OF ITS COHERENCE FOR LEARNING

Vietnam's strong performance on international assessments of learning at comparatively low levels of income makes the country as a contemporary high-performing outlier and raises questions about what factors account for these results and what insights an analysis of Vietnam's education system might offer for efforts at improving education systems' performance around learning in other countries. Within Vietnam – among policymakers and the public alike – Vietnam's education system's achievements are viewed much more critically. Many see an education system that is falling well short of its desired functions.

This paper locates many of the most important strengths and weaknesses in Vietnam's education system in the politics of education and in features of the country's education system's societal embedding. By the politics of education, we mean the relations of power and authority and of domination, contestation, cooperation, and accommodation that shape the functioning of the education system as an institutional field. By the societal embeddedness, we refer to the system's interdependent relation with its broader social and institutional environment. Understanding these elements of Vietnam's education system is of vital importance for efforts to improve education systems' performance in Vietnam and beyond.

There are good reasons to doubt whether an analysis of Vietnam's experience will be helpful for efforts at improving education systems' performance beyond Vietnam. After all, Vietnam's education system appears to possess several comparative advantages. It seems certain, for example, that Vietnam's Confucian heritage and the high respect for education and learning it confers have been broadly advantageous to the development and performance of Vietnam's education system— especially as it has been paired with a communist-party dominated political system wherein the practical need for mass education and ideological indoctrination elevates education to the status of a national policy and political security priority. Vietnam's record of rapid economic growth over last three decades growth has also been beneficial, as it has permitted continuous expansions in education expenditure. Education expenditure has been further reinforced by the sense and (often) reality of significant returns to public and private investments. Given these features, is the question of how and why Vietnam has been relatively success really all that interesting or worthy of study to those beyond Vietnam?

In this paper we will show that while basic features of contemporary Vietnam such as culture, politics, and economic conditions, have contributed to Vietnam's successes, they do not come close to affording a nuanced, mechanisms-based explanation of the country's experiences and, more specifically, the sources of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses around learning. As our analysis will show, while Vietnam has possessed certain advantages, it has also confronted massive challenges and, indeed, continues to face difficulties in realizing its education system's full potential. There has, in other words, been nothing inevitable or miraculous or simple about the sources of Vietnam's achievements in education or learning. And nor can we assume that the country's education system is meeting or can

meet contemporary and future challenges, including such problems as corruption, inequality, and economic waste. We insist that many of the most important determinants of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses lie in the realms of politics and association life and that these elements must inform any analysis of education policy. Lastly, we contend that a study of these aspects of Vietnam's experiences has much to offer to efforts to improve education systems' performance in Vietnam and beyond.

In this paper we contend that that many of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses owe to highly specific features of the *politics of education* in Vietnam and to features of its education system's *societal embedding*. Adopting a sociological perspective, our analysis of the politics of education in Vietnam trains attention on (a) the multifaceted nature of political commitments to education within Vietnam's sprawling party-state led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and (b) features of principal-agent relations among organizations that make up the country's education system. With respect to societal embedding (c), our analysis explores the education system's complex and dynamic interdependence with conditions, actors, and institutions in its broader social environment – i.e., contemporary Vietnam's society or social order. Context matters. While showing the importance of Vietnam's education system's long historical evolution, our focus in this paper is on the evolution and performance of Vietnam's education system since the mid 1980s.

The politics of education: contributions to a theory of embedded accountabilities

Recent research on the politics of education and learning holds major promise for advancing our understanding of education systems' variable performance. This study seeks to contribute to the critique and further development of this literature. Adopting a focus on the politics of education, analysts have highlighted the importance of political settlements, political commitments, and multi-stakeholder accountability relations in shaping education systems' performance around learning (see, especially, Levy et. al 2014, Hickey and Hossain 2018). From our perspective, an analysis of education systems' political dynamics must also be paired with an analysis of the social relations and institutions that make up an education system, including relations with “the system” per se. But it must also attend to the ways an education system is embedded in its local social and institutional environment.

We group the literature of interest into three categories. The first of these has been developed within the RISE program, for which this research has been carried out. We are particularly interested to engage with and further develop the RISE Conceptual Framework, which places public governance and accountability and the purpose of an education at the center of an approach to the analysis of education systems' coherence around or for learning (Pritchett 2015, Kaffenberger and Spivack 2022).

A second set of literature centers on ideas and theoretical methods for the study of politics of education and learning presented in two landmark book publications on the subject— Brian Levy and associates' (2014) edited volume on basic education in South Africa and Sam Hickey and Naomi Hossain's (2018) edited volume of cross-national studies of the politics of

education. Our interest in these books and the discussions they generated stems from their central interest in political commitment and accountability as key variables in the determinants of education systems' performance. We also note these scholars' interest in what they sometimes refer to as "social foundations," a theme to which we will return below.

A final, broader category of literature considered in this study is the large and growing body of research on the political economy of education and education systems, including approaches to the analysis of education systems that have been promoted by donor organizations such as the World Bank (e.g., SABER), as well as diverse studies of the political economy of education and learning that have informed the working groups on the political economy of policy adoption and implementation within RISE.

Addressing these concerns, we explore what features of Vietnam, its politics, and social relations reflected in its education system can explain the country's performance and what insights it might provide for efforts to improve Vietnam's education systems' performance around learning nationally and subnationally. We trace, in a non-teleological way, the institutional evolution of Vietnam's education system since the mid 1980s, when Vietnam was among Asia's poorest countries. Focusing on the politics of education policy adoption and implementation, we seek to account for the education system's strengths and weaknesses around learning. We find that key aspects of system performance owe to the complex and shifting interface of the education system and its social environment.

The paper is organized as follows. **Section 2** establishes the intellectual terrain and context of this study by way of a brief survey of recent theoretical literature on the politics of education and learning and a preliminary synoptic overview of Vietnam's performance around education and learning and the questions it raises for Vietnam and scholarly and policy research on the politics of education and learning. Section 2 also provides some historical context (for a fuller account see London 2011, ch 1).

In **Section 3**, based on our reading of the theoretical and policy literature and the evolution of Vietnam's education system with its various strengths and weaknesses, we identify three dimensions or *domains* of principal agent relations that we claim have figured crucially in the determination of Vietnam's performance around education and learning (London 2020a, 2020b). These include:

- a. Features of Vietnam's political settlement and, within it, the origins, intents, purposes, and evolving features of the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV's) political commitment to the promotion of education and learning.
- b. Features of the public governance of Vietnam's education system and of the management of education systems within it, and its bearing on the system's performance around the promotion of education and learning. And,

- c. Features of the ways Vietnam's citizens participate in and engage with their country's schools and the broader education system and its bearing on Vietnam's performance around education and learning.

As we seek to understand the mechanisms affecting and/or conditions under which an education system's coherence for learning emerges and is sustained, **Section 4** formulates research questions and hypotheses to guide our analysis. Drawing on the RISE Conceptual Framework, we introduce a set of specific analytical concepts for understanding relations within the education system across three *domains of principal-agent relations*. We propose a three-dimensional explanatory framework for exploring determinants of system coherence for learning in Vietnam and beyond and outline the methods we have adopted and data we have collected for their investigation.

The remaining sections of the report address the three dimensions of our investigation established above. Namely, political commitment, public governance, and societal engagement. In **Section 5** we address features of Vietnam's political settlement and the origins, intents, and purposes of the CPV's commitment to promoting education and learning. In **Section 6** we examine features of public governance that bear on the implementation of education policies and the decisions of local stakeholders within the education system. In **Section 7** we investigate how Vietnam's citizens participate in and engage with schools and the education system more broadly. Data employed draws from various sources and includes data collected in case-based research in northern, central, and southern provinces.

In the conclusion (**Section 8**) we summarize our findings and their significance and offer a preliminary sketch of an "embedded accountabilities" (EA) approach. We suggest ways that insights from Vietnam's experience and this approach may contribute to the analysis of the politics of learning while also informing multi-stakeholder action. We use Vietnam's experience to contribute to the critique and further development of the emergent theoretical and policy literature on the political economy of education and learning. Finally, we offer suggestions for practical action via research, advocacy, and action in Vietnam and beyond.

A key message of this analysis, and a lesson from Vietnam, is that while recent literature on the politics of education and learning is arguing along the right lines, it does not go far enough in its analysis of politics or deep enough in the analysis of the dynamic features of education systems' social embedding, i.e., education systems' inextricable and dynamic interdependence with their specific social environments. Looking beyond Vietnam, we suggest that there is value in exploring the politics of learning from a sociological perspective, i.e., in a way that appreciates that the effectiveness of any education system depends on features of its societal embedding.

2. THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN VIETNAM: MORE COMPLICATED AND INTERESTING THAN IT FIRST APPEARS

Having registered rapid increases in enrollments and with its strong results on international assessments of learning at relatively low levels of income, Vietnam represents a particularly interesting setting in which to explore the determinants of an education system's effectiveness, especially with respect to learning. In considering the case of Vietnam, there is a need to establish its significance. That is, what (really) do we stand to gain from understanding more about Vietnam's performance? This question is important for three reasons. First, given specific features of Vietnam, there are legitimate questions about whether Vietnam's experiences are at all relevant to education systems in other countries. Second, if we can learn from Vietnam, how can the country's experiences inform research and policy reforms in other settings. Finally, what can an analysis of the politics of Vietnam's education system contribute to efforts in Vietnam to improve the system's coherence for learning?

Taking up these themes, this section establishes salient features of Vietnam's education system's performance, including its many strengths – which are of great interest to comparativists – and its less widely-known weaknesses – in which education system stakeholders in Vietnam have a keen and pressing interest. Next, we address the value and limitations of certain superficial “common sense” explanations, arguing that basic factors that help explain Vietnam's successes are a good deal more complicated and interesting than they appear. Specifically, we contend that while Vietnam's historical, cultural, and political features, its recent record of rapid economic growth, and prudent education policies all help to account for the country's education system's strengths, none of these factors – each of which are complex – suffice as explanations for the country's education system's strengths and are even less useful for understanding its numerous weaknesses. As for the question of what Vietnam can teach us for efforts at improving education system performance, a review of Vietnam's performance leads us to inquire more deeply into the politics of education systems and features of their public governance, which is addressed in the subsequent section.

Elements of success, areas of weakness

We can begin by considering salient features of Vietnam's education system's performance.¹

- a. Vietnam has registered explosive growth in enrolments at all levels of education, achieving near universal primary and lower-secondary enrolment (by state accounts), including a doubling of net lower-secondary enrolment and a tripling of upper-secondary enrolment between 1992 and 2006 (Dang and Glewwe 2017). Between 1992 and 2014, the country registered an extraordinary nearly three-year increase in average years of schooling.

¹ A fuller picture can be had via work of the RISE Programme's [Vietnam Country Research Team](#).

- b. Vietnam's performance on international assessments of learning, including but not limited to PISA, surpasses that of all countries in its income group and indeed approaches that of many high-income countries, in math, reading, and science.²
- c. Vietnam has made great strides in making education more accessible to all citizens, in part owing to continued fiscal prioritization of education, including large-scale transfers from richer to poorer provinces that have permitted enrollment gains across all regions of the country. Within the ethnic (Kinh) majority population, girls lead boys in enrolment and academic achievement, contrasting with experiences in neighboring countries, including mainland China and Cambodia.

It is equally important to note numerous weaknesses in Vietnam's education system.

- a. Although enrollments and years of schooling have increased, Vietnam has one of the shortest school years in the world while the quality of education is widely uneven, making enrolment statistics a problematic measure of success.
- b. While many in Vietnam are proud of the country's performance on international assessments of learning such as PISA, skeptics contend that the results are misleading, i.e., that they are indicative of an education system and bureaucracy geared toward raising and reporting elite students' performance on tests rather than an education system and bureaucracy committed to promoting expansions in learning among all children. They warn that emphasizing Vietnam's PISA results invites complacency in the face of important system-wide challenges.
- c. While Vietnam's children have unprecedented access to education, disparities remain, exemplified by large disparities in rates of secondary school completion across regions, income groups, and ethnicities.

Given our interest in an education system's effectiveness and limitations in promoting expansions in learning for all children, it will be useful to explore two of the aforementioned aspects of Vietnam's performance in greater detail. The first concerns results of learning assessments. The second concerns questions about the quality and equity of the education system and its implications.

² Vietnam's 2016 PISA scores surpassed that of all countries in its income groups and many high-income countries, in math, reading, and science. Owing to the manner in which the assessment was conducted, there are ample grounds to assume Vietnam's 2016 PISA scores present an exaggerated picture of the country's successes in promoting learning.² Still, results from other assessments give us confidence that Vietnam does perform better than other countries (see, for example, Rolleston and James 2015), even as the country's 2018 PISA results were not released owing to problems in verifying the results. Controversies notwithstanding, Vietnam's performance on learning is impressive nonetheless (Glewwe 2021).

What learning assessments tell us, and what they don't tell us

With respect to learning, there is solid evidence that Vietnam preforms better than other countries in its income group. And also that Vietnam's education system's effectiveness in promoting the types of knowledge, learning, and skills that Vietnamese children need and want remains lacking, despite important recent advances (World Bank 2014, UNESCO 2015, London 2022). The question is not whether participants assessed in the PISA program in 2016 or 2018 or 2022 performed well or how representative their performance was, but rather that talk of PISA and the results of those students who participated tend to conceal the shortcomings of a system that is excessively geared towards performance on tests and insufficiently invested in training children's talents into skills necessary for the labor market.

As reported by Vu and Perkins (2022), the World Economic Forum's competitiveness report indicates that "Vietnam ranks poorly in a wide variety of areas that are critical to moving up the technology ladder," including 93rd in the quality of its "education and skills" and 102nd in "innovation capacity." In some respects, these shortcomings are due to technical aspects of education (e.g., content, pedagogy, etc.) that can, in principle, be adjusted through technical fixes. For example, reform-minded policy makers have charged that aspects of the curriculum that emphasize political doctrine and rigid historical narratives undermined the development of skills citizens require (Hoang Tuy, 2019; Nguyen Quoc Vuong, 2018). While accepting the aim of promoting a "socialist-oriented market economy" reformers call for a greater emphasis across the curriculum on specific skills and knowledge a "socialist citizen" should have to function effectively in the increasingly global world.

With respect to equity, questions about the quality education for all are at the fore. While the CPV has worked consistently to promote more equitable access to quality education, progress on this front has slowed amid intensifying inequalities and an increasing sense and reality that in contemporary Vietnam's education system and labor markets, what matters most is not what you know or how well you learn, but rather who you know or how much you are willing to pay for grades, a diploma, extra-tutoring, opportunities to re-sit exams, the chance to sit in a "high quality" classroom within a public school, and other institutionalized and pervasive informal costs attached to education in Vietnam. Such trends call into question the principle of quality education for all and effectively undermine the values of social solidarity and equity to which the CPV has long pledged its allegiance. Other risks stem from the intersection of education policies and economic policies. For example, recent rapid expansions in foreign investment-driven, low-skilled, labor-intensive manufacturing and services employment has been associated with declining enrollment in upper-secondary education and declining returns to education in some provinces. Rather than promoting quality education for all, Vietnam is at risk of promoting lasting social inequalities.

It bears emphasis that that, within Vietnam, the sentiment— even among Party leaders, policymakers, and more resoundingly still among the general population—is that Vietnam's education system is *underperforming* (Anh et. al. 2021). As will be observed below, the

decentralized system of state finance Vietnam employs at times supports and at other times appears to undermine improvements in the quality and equity of schooling (Anh et al. 2021).

Accounting for Vietnam's education system's effectiveness and weaknesses

There are many reasons why Vietnam performs well on education and learning and in some respects Vietnam's strong performance is, while anomalous, not surprising. In what follows, we consider basic historical-cultural, political, and economic features of Vietnam that are widely presumed to account for commonly cited strengths of Vietnam's education system. As we will observe below, while each of these factors are important and are in certain respects specific to Vietnam, none provide an adequate understanding or explanation of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, they are of limited value in making sense of Vietnam's experiences and less valuable still for informing policy reforms.

As indicated above, three sets of factors are commonly invoked to account for Vietnam's successes. These are, it must be emphasized, ideal-typical representations of common sense understandings of Vietnam's successes, i.e., "at first glance" conjectures that a reasonably well informed person (foreigner or Vietnam citizen) might reference as part of arguments to account for Vietnam's success. These include features of Vietnam's culture and history and politics, its recent history of economic growth, and features of its education policies.

Historical and cultural features plus party leadership

It can be persuasively argued that Vietnam was bound to be relatively successful in learning because of its Confucian heritage and communist political system. Globally, it is widely accepted that Confucianism as an aspect of East Asian cultures contained institutional and ideational aspects that have not only been supportive of education and learning but which have been largely or wholly absent much of the rest of the world. Furthermore, both during and since the end of the Cold War, it is widely known that party-dominant political systems, including Communist Party dominated political systems, tend to place special emphasis on mass education as an instrument for promotion of ideological and normative conformity. It is important to establish the value and limitations of such arguments for understanding Vietnam's education system.

Vietnam is a country with a Confucian heritage that stretches back more than a millennium. The significance of Confucianism is manifold and includes but is not limited to Confucianism's veneration of education, learning, and moral rectitude. Between the 10th and 19th centuries, Vietnam developed what we might call as "classical Confucian education system," i.e., a system that served the purpose of staffing and improving the bureaucratic efficiency of dynastic states. This was done through the continuous education, training, and competitive exams-based selection of scholar-bureaucrats. As the scholar Alexander Woodside has shown (1983, 1988, 2009), in Vietnam, as in China and Korea before it, dynastic leaders pursued the development of a skilled scholar-gentry to increase the effectiveness of their rule by way of the development of a rules-based social order, as opposed

to one based on (personalistic patrimonial) ties. The result was the development, for a time, of a sort of “precocious, incomplete de-feudalization” (Woodside 2009) wherein East Asian rulers were able to govern sprawling territories on a rules-based basis centuries before the emergence of comparable rules-based orders in Europe. While education in these times was limited to a tiny minority of the population (and only boys), it nonetheless had powerful, lasting effects, in the sense that it inculcated in Vietnam’s people and culture a high level of respect for education and learning. There is no doubt that this cultural element has certain advantages.

It is equally the case, however, that Confucianism as a set of ideals and historical conditions does not suffice as an explanation for Vietnam’s successes. Firstly, historically, the education systems that prevailed in East Asia in the classical (Confucian) period were accessible to a small minority of the population. Most education in Vietnam occurred through informal village based schools consisting of a very small number of pupils selected for training (London 2011 offers an extended account). In Vietnam’s context, the classical education system was never geared to education for the masses and its efficacy as an instrument of state building and elite selection faltered as it became ultimately subordinated and corrupted by French colonizers and many within its own ranks that sought to turn the bureaucracy into an engine of economic accumulation. The administration of taxation thus became a path to personal enrichment as did the buying and selling of titles and positions in the bureaucracy. While such practices can be seen as antithetical to Confucian principles, they were nonetheless an important aspect of Confucianism as it was actually practiced. In the scholarly literature, we see Vietnam developed a conservative variant of Confucianism (Woodside 1983) that Dynastic rulers fitted to the aims of Vietnam’s Dynastic rules. There is little doubt that Vietnam’s Confucian heritage helps to account for the great attention given to education. Yet Confucianism per se does not suffice as an explanation. Further, as we will observe below, there are aspects of Confucian idealism – especially its tendency to elitism – that have at various times limited the effectiveness of the education system.

There is a widely held view that Communist regimes take education especially seriously, given education system’s instrumental uses. Marxism-Leninism or, more aptly, Leninism, has quite specific implications for an education system as its core assumption is precisely the historical indispensability of the communist party. In such a setting, a bureaucratically organized mass education system capable of broadcasting this idea is imperative. Another function of education systems everywhere, is to train new cohorts of elites. In East Asia, we have observed affinities as well as tensions and contradictions between Marxism-Leninism and the Confucian ideologies it displaced and sometimes co-opted. Scholars of East Asia and of Vietnam (Nguyen K.V. 1974, Young 1979) have noted that elite tendencies observed in neo-Confucianism were in respects incorporated into East Asian variants of Marxism-Leninism. According to some, the affinities of neo-Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism can be seen in their compatibility with an elite form of state-craft that relegates peasants and commoners to the role of bystanders (Woodside 2009).

Globally, all education systems are multi-functional and are always bound up in politics and, especially, in processes of state formation (Green 1990). Whether in classical East Asia (Woodside 2009) or France or the United States or Japan, elites have used education systems to promote and reproduce prevailing ideas, including those of ruling parties and/or ruling classes. The ways political elites do this and their specific political priorities vary. Still, mass education systems in China and Vietnam, under the leadership of communist parties, were not only committed to promoting ideological conformity. In both countries, having a political leadership and a political party that prioritized mass education proved massively helpful both for promoting ideological indoctrination and for expanding learning.

We can swiftly rule out the false notion that Communist political systems or communism or communist heritage promotes effective education systems while also appreciating that many Leninist and Leninist-inspired political regimes have been effective in promoting both mass education systems and education systems that perform well with respect to learning. Experience in Central and Eastern Europe today, for example, and Pol-Pot era Cambodia (for an extreme example) shows us at neither communist parties nor communist heritage promises good education or good learning results, however. Mainland China, during its Great Famine and Cultural Revolution, and in the early stages of market-transition, also shows that the presence of a Communist Party does not mean the presence of an effective education system. Still, Leninism appears to confer certain organizational advantages that extend beyond political domination. In East Asia, Singapore (under the People's Action Party up to the present) and Taiwan (under the Kuomintang, or KMT, until the late 1980s) while not communist, featured states that were organized according to Leninist political principles (London 2018, ch 7). These countries' education systems also manifested trappings of Leninist regimes' ideological priorities.

Countries with single party-dominant regimes vary considerably in their attributes. In all other countries, for that matter, there is a need to dig more deeply into the political and, indeed, the ideological history that shapes the purposes and development of education systems. In Vietnam, education is not just another issue. It was centrally connected to social tensions arising from specific features of Vietnam's classical (pre-colonial) period and, crucially, the rhetoric and political strategy of anti-colonial struggle. Infeed, perhaps more than in any other country, calls for anti-colonial struggle and socialist revolution in Vietnam were heavily centered on the expansion of education and the principle of education for all. Thus, not only was it the case that aspects of Vietnam's political system elevated the status of education to that of a national policy priority and a national and political security priority. The goal of promoting access to education to all the country's people figured centrally in the political programmes of leading anti-colonial groups and figures including but not limited to the CPV.

This included the CPV which, in its rise to a position of dominance in the country's independence struggle, maintained a consistent focus on educational themes. After the First Indochina War (aka the French Indochina War, 1946-1954) and with the consolidation of the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under its leadership, the party placed education at the center of processes of state formation, state making, and the

promotion of a nationalist vision of socialist modernity and citizenship. Throughout the Second Indochina War (or the American War, as it is universally known in Vietnam), the party extended its education system southward and within a few years Vietnam had a nationally scaled education system firmly under the party's leadership.

From past to present, then, education policy in Vietnam has been centrally associated with state building, nation building, patriotism and, not least, the relentless emphasis of the CPV's subjective legitimacy. To state that all national education systems are political is uncontroversial. To state that the magnitude of the politicization of Vietnam's education system is extraordinary is equally the case. Indeed, Vietnam's education system is deeply embedded in the CPV's sprawling party-state and in the production of consciousness. Most school principals and leading teachers in any school will be members of the party, as will leading figures in the education bureaucracy, from commune-level cadres responsible for social affairs up through the district-level bureaus of education, the province-level departments of education, up to the ministry of education in Hanoi. Party-led organizations extend throughout the education system, involving students in ideological training from kindergarten through to the PhD and beyond.

Vietnam's education system has benefitted from an expanding economy

Beyond culture and politics there is economic growth. There is little question that Vietnam's education system has benefitted greatly from the three decades of continued and often rapid economic growth that Vietnam has experienced since the 1990s. Further, Vietnam and its education system have benefitted from large amounts of official (i.e., multilateral and bilateral) development assistance (ODA). Economic growth boosted the amount of resources available for public and private education expenditure. However, while increased education expenditure can be helpful, it hardly ensures a well-performing education system. While the CPV has long expressed a commitment to education, it has been Vietnam's rapidly expanding economy and not the Party's position per se that has permitted ever increasing public and private spending on education. In this context, economic incentives have played an important role, as the sense and reality of expanding opportunities in the world market and in local labor markets and returns to investment in education and skilling have incentivized education spending by both government and households. Scholarly analyses have highlighted numerous factors relating to economic growth and education policy that help account for Vietnam's performance. The willingness of Vietnam's family to invest time and resources into their children's learning is considerable.

Prudent policies

In addition to advantages conferred by history, culture, political regime type, and the presence of economic growth, Vietnam's performance has almost certainly benefitted from a reasonably well functioning bureaucracy and the presence of prudent education policies. With respect to bureaucracy, while Vietnam continues to confront such problems as corruption, its state functions stably. As we will observe, fiscal and administrative decentralization possess major

challenges and opportunities with respect to the achievement of an effective national education system. On the whole, Vietnam's bureaucratic apparatus is comparatively strong at delivering the logistical good necessary to run an education system at scale. Further, the country has developed a well elaborated set of education policies, providing a formal institutional basis that is stronger than in most other countries in its income group. In line with this account, Dang and Glewwe (2017) cite such factors as government policies, economic growth that permitted sustained increases in public and private spending on education, and elements of Vietnam's Confucian heritage which, it is alleged, accord extraordinary importance to education and learning.

Acknowledge but do not obsess about Vietnam's recent performance or history

Based on its performance in expanding enrollments and its results on international assessments of learning, it is easy to understand why international observers are fascinated with country's experiences. Vietnam's performance is indeed impressive. As scholars of Vietnam's education system, we continually encounter difficulties and objections in foregrounding these problems in the wider literature, as most foreign observers are struck and even captivated by Vietnam's apparent success.

On the other hand, based on its specific features, it is easy to understand why Vietnam's strong performance is not wholly surprising. Indeed, one could reason that the only thing holding Vietnam's education system back from being on par with Korea's, for example, was the massive destruction and disruption wrought by the First (French) and Second (American) Indochina wars, and by the subsequent 20 years of isolation and privation Vietnam faced under the Sino-American embargo that was not lifted until the mid-1990s. Unlike Korea, Vietnam did not receive massive amounts of US aid directly following the war. Take away the wars and post-war embargo, one might argue that levels of learning in Vietnam today might well rival that of South Korea. Furthermore, unlike Korea or China, the country's eldership has been slow in recognizing and promoting higher education.

In this study we will explore the nature and sources of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses, particularly those that appear to support and undermine the achievement of the CPV's stated commitment to quality education for all.

However, this is not a simple formula. The most important factors in accounting for Vietnam's education system's successes and failures are to be found in specific features of the country's politics and, especially, features of the education system's dynamic embedding in Vietnam's social environment. To pursue this analysis, we turn to recent scholarly and policy literature on the politics of education and learning and how it can inform our explorations of the Vietnam case. Overall, we are interested in how features of politics have shaped the adoption (i.e., selection, orientation, and purposes) of education policies over time. Beyond this, we are interested in system-level and societal factors bearing on Vietnam's education system's "*coherence*" for learning (Pritchett 2015), i.e., the extent to which the dynamic sets of social relations that make up a country's education system promote the expansion of

learning, and why. As we will show in this paper, many features of the public governance of Vietnam's education system appear to undermine the education system's performance around learning, even as other features of public governance are clearly supportive of desirable education and learning outcomes. We seek to understand how and why.

3. INSIGHTS AND LINES OF INQUIRY DRAWN FROM RESEARCH ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Vietnam provides fertile ground for an exploration of ideas and debates in the emerging body of scholarly and policy literature on education systems and the political economy of education and learning. Broadly, this literature asks which features of countries' politics, public governance, and attributes of their education system can help to explain systems' performance around learning. Researchers within the global Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) program have developed analytic concepts and a framework for the analysis of education systems' coherence for learning centered on systems analysis and, more specifically, relations of accountability that form an education system. Outside of RISE, Brian Levy's landmark study of basic education in South Africa together with Sam Hickey and Naomi Hossain's edited volume on the politics of education in developing countries and recent literature on political settlements, effective states, and policy diagnostics offer concepts and methods that can assist analysis of the Vietnam case. Here, we provide a brief overview of the RISE framework and other scholarly and policy literature on the politics of education and learning and explain how this informs our analysis of Vietnam.

The RISE conceptual framework and the Political Economy of Learning

In a series of RISE working papers, RISE team members have developed a well-elaborated framework for the analysis of education systems' coherence for learning (see, especially, RISE 2015). The framework construes education systems as being constituted by a series of domains of principal-agent relations (such as elite politics, compact, management, and society) principals may be more or less effective in holding agents to account. Relations within these domains can then be analyzed across five (policy) design elements, including delegation, information, finance, motivation, and school support.

In this paper we extend this framework while also seeking to draw on insights and analytical frames from the rapidly expanding literature on the political economy of education and learning. We have been particularly interested in work by Brian Levy and his collaborators (Levy et al. 2018), Sam Hickey and Naomi Hossain and their co-authors (Hickey and Hossain e2019), and provocative responses to these works by Lant Pritchett (2018, 2019a, 2019b).ⁱ

In their work, Levy, Hickey, Hossain, and their collaborators have elaborated conceptually rich and analytically powerful frameworks and extended these to in-depth analyses in a variety of settings. At a general level, the political economy of learning is interested in the way politics or political economy conditions the development of education systems and the selection, conduct, and outcomes of education policies. As Hickey and Hossain (2019, 13) point out, to be adequate, a political economy of learning must shed light on

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

As detailed in London (2020), drawing on Levy and Walton (2013) and the political settlements work of Khan (2000, 2010), both Levy and associates' and Hickey and Hossain elaborate analytic frameworks that train attention on (1) features of countries' "political settlements," (2) features of "public governance," (3) and the variable ways in which these can combine and interact across different levels of government or governance to impact learning outcomes. As Pritchett (2018) notes, the frameworks represent an advance in the political economy of learning by providing a way of studying "the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants" of learning in a way that underscore the context-specific features of the political economy of learning and illustrate the multiple different and possible ways in which countries can succeed or fail in promoting desired learning outcomes. As Hickey and Hossain (p. 39-40) emphasize, the idea is not that features of politics *determine* the development of education systems but rather continuously affect and condition their development.

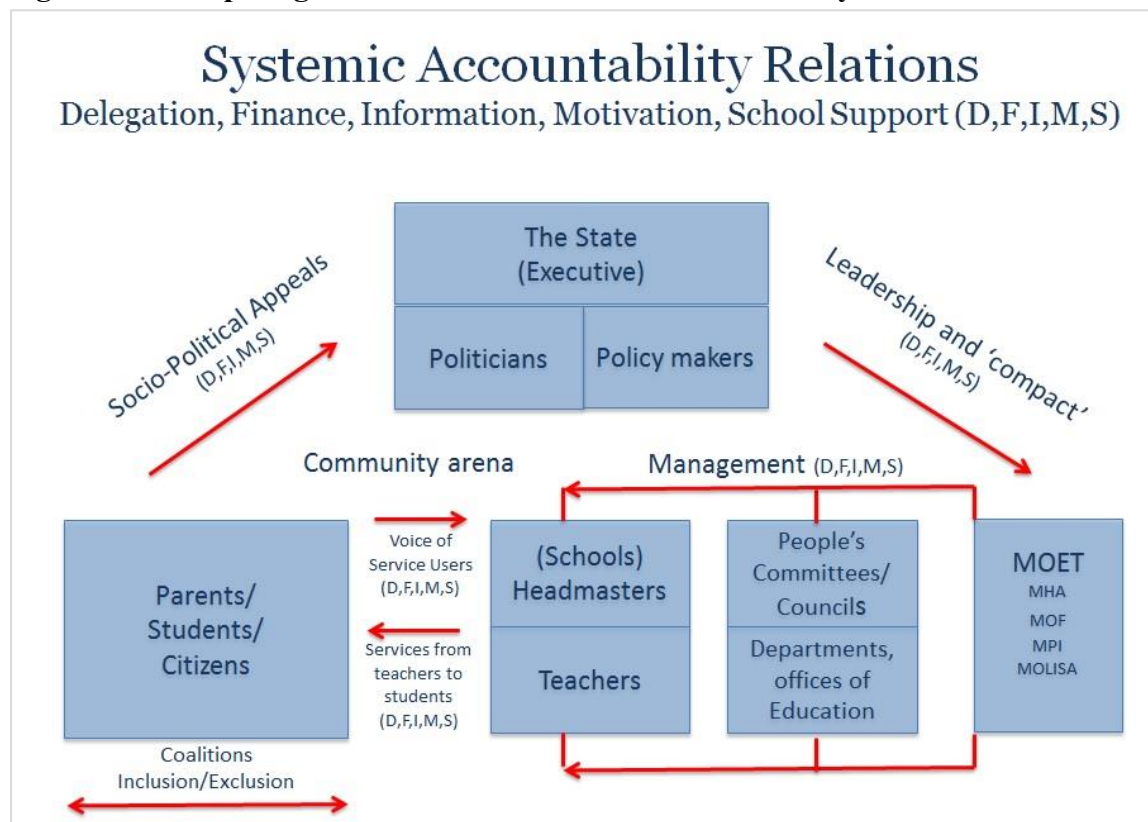
Khan's (2000, 2010, and 2017) defines political settlements as "a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability," even as the presumption that power and institutions are distinct is ill founded. Drawing on Khan, the work of Douglass North, and on Levy's earlier work (2014, 17) both Levy (2018) and Hickey and Hossain (2019) present a common tool for distinguishing among different varieties of political settlements or configurations of power, ranging from those absent a viable political settlement and ridden with perpetual violent conflict and those with more stable political settlements, including "sustainable democracies" (the most stable). Within this scheme, Vietnam may be understood as a dominant single-party regime. However, such labels are far too general to be meaningful without context.

Among the most promising aspects of the political economy of learning (PEL) literature and the effective states and political settlements literature forces us to confront (and not lose sight) of education systems' always-embedded character, i.e. the notion and reality that education systems' performance is shaped by the broader social orders in which they develop. This marks a major advance in thinking about education systems and reflects Polanyi's (1944) insistence on the always embedded character of market economies. This is consistent with Kingdon's assertion that "political economy," done right, considers not simply politics and economy but structural, historical, institutional conditions (Kingdon et al., 46-47), i.e., how education systems are shaped by properties of the social orders within which they are embedded. Contrary to Khan's conception of political settlements, our understanding is that power cannot be separated from institutions. Power and institutions, that is, are often *indistinct*.ⁱⁱ The question for education systems is how their embeddedness in the dynamic power relations and institutions that define social orders shapes their performance around learning.

Adapting the RISE Framework to an exploration of Vietnam

Drawing from the above, we have identified three features of the politics of education and learning in Vietnam that correspond to elements of the RISE programme's accountability framework and which we view as crucial to an analysis of Vietnam's experience. These include features of the CPV's political commitment to education and learning, features of the public governance of Vietnam's education system, and features of what we will call "societal engagement," which refers to the way in which citizens participate in their countries and localities' education systems and the way they engage with the broader politics of education and learning, which can take on many different forms. In reference to Figure 1, below, the analysis traces these three aspects (political commitment, governance, and societal engagement) across the different relations.

Figure 1: Principal-agent relations in Vietnam's Education System



Source: RISE Vietnam CRT

4. RESEARCH METHODS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

As part of efforts to probe more deeply into the political economy factors that shape education systems' performance around learning, the RISE programme initiated the formation of two political economy research teams (or PETs), exploring fundamental aspects of education systems' performance around learning. These include aspects of education systems pertaining to the *adoption* of policies meant to promote education and learning (PET-A) and those pertaining to education policies' *implementation* (PET-I). Understanding how these aspects shape education systems' performance around learning is the overarching aim of the RISE PETs' work

Formed within the PET-A cluster, our research indicates that both adoption and implementation aspects of Vietnam's education system are essential to an analysis of its performance, and thus we address aspects of both. Specifically, we observe that in a decentralized environment such as Vietnam, implementation processes are of fundamental importance, while vital aspects of and decisions regarding policy adoption frequently occur (or fail to occur) at local levels of governance. Which is to say that, even when there is clear "buy-in" with respect to the notion "taking learning seriously" at the central level, the accountability of local stakeholders is far from assured.

This analysis is based on extensive research on Vietnam's education system carried out between 2016 and 2022, including the collection of primary data supported by the RISE program's Vietnam country research team, headed by Paul Glewwe and Joan DeJaeger, and the Political Economy of (policy) Adoption Team, headed by Alec Gershberg. This includes data from more than 80 in-depth interviews conducted with key education sector stakeholders, as well as original on-site case-based research in three provinces in Vietnam's northern, central, and southern regions. The result is a novel study of the political economy of education and learning in Vietnam that we hope will be stimulating for analysts of education systems in Vietnam and other settings indicated. In research with the RISE Vietnam CRT and in light of the RISE conceptual framework and other relevant literature, the methods specified for this paper center on the exploration of three domains of locations within accountability relations that beg deeper exploration. These include

- **Political commitment**, which refers to features of Vietnam's political settlement and the activities of and relations among political elites, politicians, and policymakers in the adoption of education policies that affect learning;
- **Public governance**, which refers to relations among organizations that are in principle responsible for carrying out education policies and deliver results as well as management relations within these organizations. These encompass:

- Relations between various national/central level agencies involved in the design and conduct of education policies,
- Relations between these agencies and local authorities and relations between local authorities and specialized local education agencies, which are doubly accountable to their respective level of local authorities and central level agencies, while also being responsible for overseeing schools,
- Management relations within schools
- Finally, **Societal engagement** refers to citizens relations to the education system; these include formal and informal relations between citizens and schools, citizens and Vietnam's sprawling shadow-education market, and citizens and the local and (especially) national politics of education.

Research questions, methods, and analytic framework

Our departure point for the exploration of these features of Vietnam's education system and its relation to system performance around learning rests on the assumption that they may only be adequately understood through an analysis that reflects the complexity of Vietnam's education system's institutional features, socio historical context of their evolution, and their embeddedness in the broader sets of processes, relations, and institutions that make up Vietnam's social environment. Corresponding to aspects of accountability relations identified above, we formed three broad exploratory research questions, as below

- 4.4.1. How have features of Vietnam's political settlement shaped the goals of the country's education policies over time and, by extension, influenced political commitment and the performance of the education system around learning? More specifically, what features of Vietnam's political settlement and education policies have informed the origins and transformation of the intents and purposes of its education policies, especially with respect to learning?
- 4.4.2. How have features of the public governance of Vietnam's education system, understood here narrowly as the ways in which stakeholders within Vietnam's party-state apparatus, including organizations and schools, interact with each other in order to influence the outcomes of public policies, informed and driven national and local political priorities and implementation to shape schooling and learning outcomes?
- 4.4.3. How have features of societal engagement with the education system, both with respect to citizens' relations with actors and institutions in the wider education system (including the shadow education system) and their

engagement with the politics of education, particularly through Vietnam's educational public sphere, affected Vietnam's performance with respect to learning and the CPV's oft-cited political goal of quality education for all.

These questions' exploratory nature and their stated interest in the relation between complex and diffuse relations and learning outcomes are an obvious weakness. As the research is ongoing, we have resisted the formation of specific hypotheses in favor of a more inductive approach centered on the notion of an education system's coherence for learning, understood as the degree to which features of social relations that define the education system can be demonstrated to enhance or undermine the accountability of actors and organizations within the system with respect to learning.

Loosely, our paper explores the following propositions:

- P1. Features of Vietnam's political settlement and political commitment to education as indicated by aspects of its education policies and the intents and purposes of its education policies have enhanced Vietnam's education system's performance with respect to learning;
- P2. Features of the public governance of Vietnam's education system enhances its coherence for learning;
- P3. Features of public governance understood as the way in which citizens interact with the education system and the broader politics of education enhance the system's accountability with respect to learning.

Data sources and methods of data collection

To explore these propositions, we collected a range of primary and secondary data, including political and policy documents, interview data collected by the RISE VN CRT between 2016 and 2019, and Vietnamese-language media sources. The matrix below summarizes the relation between the study's sub-research questions and data sources and methods of data collection.

Table #: Research questions, data sources, and methods of data collection

Sub-research questions	Data sources		Methods of data collection
1. What explains the motivations and behaviors of CPV over time in promoting both expansions in enrollment and measures to improve learning outcomes over time? And what are the limits of this success	Party and government policy documents;		Desk research; Participant observation

2. How have features of Vietnam's political settlement shaped the goals of the country's education policies over time and, by extension, influenced political commitment and the performance of the education system around learning?	Newspaper and magazine articles; Traditional and social media sources	A total of 78 key informants incl. senior educators and (retired) policy planners (national and provincial levels) (a significant amount of these data was collected by the Vietnam CRT between 2016 and 2019) A total of 39 community members in a broadly socioeconomically representative sample of provinces;	fieldwork from 2016-2019 In-depth individual interviews
3. How have features of public governance informed and driven national and local political priorities and implementation to shape schooling and learning outcomes? How have features of relations among and decision-making processes within and between state organizations influenced policy priorities, practices, and outcomes?	Secondary data (e.g., existing scholarly and policy literature; data from the World Management Survey, PAPI, and RISE CRT)		
4. How have patterns of societal engagement with the education system affected Vietnam's performance with respect to learning, particularly as it concerns the accessibility of quality education for all Vietnamese citizens -- an oft-cited political goal of the CPV?			
5. What are the implications of a study of these aspects for efforts aimed at improving the performance of education systems around learning and in Vietnam and other settings? And how can an analysis of Vietnam's experiences contribute to existing scholarly and policy literature on the politics of learning?	The current study's analysis; Related literature on the politics of education and learning worldwide		

Table 2: Key informant interviews

Key informants	Interviewer information
14 Policy makers, national level	Current and former policy makers, including a former Vice President, senior leaders from ministries (of Education; Finance; Science, Planning and Investment); National Assembly's Committee on Culture, Education, Youths, Teenagers and Children.
16 Educational leaders, national level	Leaders of educational institutes, associations, and two National Universities.

10 Independent scholars	Independent scholars and educational critics (who were National Assembly's former members, a former MOET minister's assistant, leaders of education associations and universities, and community education projects).
38 Policy makers, provincial level	Administrative leaders at the provincial level, including vice/directors or heads of Department of Education, Education Inspectorate, Association for the Encouragement of Study, Provincial People's Council of Social Affairs, Office of Finance, Education Bureaus in three provinces: Hai Phong, Nghe An, and Kien Giang.
39 Commune leaders, school administrators, community members	Local authorities, school principals, and members of the community including parents in Kien Giang, Nghe An, and Hai Phong. As of December 2021, data collection in Kien Giang had been completed, with the remainder scheduled to be completed in mid-2022.

Our methods of data collection and analysis were selected in ways that assist our understanding of policy decisions and practices and trace them (where possible) to features of relations among elites and various education system stakeholders in accordance with a process-tracing approach (as outlined by George and Bennett (2005: 206) and work by Ragin and Becker (1992), Collier (1993: 115), and Tansey (2007) and increasingly explored in the education sector (Berkovich 2019). In this regard, process-tracing based on document analysis, open-ended interviewing, and participant observation helps to explain relations between factors and between actors of interest and may “provide a narrative explanation of a causal path that leads to a specific outcome” (Vennesson, 2008: 235).

In addition, the analysis of cases will be used to assess whether patterns reflect those suggested by the analytic frameworks outlined above. Divergences of the Vietnamese case from claims or expectations reflected in the theoretical literature will pose opportunities for the refinement and/or extension of the theoretical literature and its analytic frames, contributing to the wide literature on the political economy of education and learning. The analysis was undertaken by analysts fluent in Vietnamese and with a background in Vietnam studies and familiarity with the country's education system.

Box 1: In-depth interviews

Data for this analysis was drawn from wide range of documentary sources, including government reports, scholarly and policy literature, participant observation, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions, and surveys. This included extensive primary Vietnamese documentary sources, including party and government policy documents, newspaper and magazine articles, and various other traditional and social media sources.

It draws on accumulated participant observation research of the first author, conducted in Vietnam since 1997 as well as 55 original KIIs, of which 43 KIIs were conducted by the Vietnam CRT between 2016 and 2019 on related themes.

The interviews targeted senior education sector officials, educators, and active and retired policy planners and administrators recruited through chain referral (snowball sampling, Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) as well as national and local political figures familiar with aspects of education policy. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and facilitated by our contacts at Vietnam National University - Hanoi.

Interviews protocols were trained on dimensions of principal agent relations identified in the RISE conceptual framework. Data from these interviews was coded and analyzed along with data from other interviews undertaken in the Vietnam CRT. We also draw on insights from associated survey data addressing parents and community members undertaken by the Vietnam CRT in three provinces.

A note on analytical concepts employed in this study

This analysis centers on the use, critique, and further development of a number of specific analytic concepts drawn from theoretical and polity literature on education systems and public policy. For present purposes it will be useful to establish the meaning of these concepts in brief and in the clearest possible manner. Four analytic concepts referred to in this analysis include:

- A. **Political settlements** refers to how power is shared among political actors and organizations in a given historical context. Political settlements analysis is useful for understanding the relation between politics and the institutions that shape and define an education system as well as education policy goals;
- B. **Corporatist political settlements** refers to political settlements in which ruling groups accommodate or incorporate various non-elite groups as part of strategies to win and maintain support and to achieve political objectives. In this paper, Vietnam is conceived as an instance of an enduring communist corporatist political settlement that has reflected aspects of stability and change in the context of the CPV's efforts to marry its Leninist political organization with market-based capital accumulation;
- C. **State formation** refers to processes of state-building that shape the institutional evolution of the education system in relation to Vietnam's broader party-state apparatus;
- D. **Inter-institutional regime** refers to the complete array of formal and informal institutions that prevail and shape social life in a given setting (in this case Vietnam) within which an education system is embedded. Spanning the fields of politics, economy, secondary associations, and culture, a country's inter-institutional regime is integral to the analysis of an education system.

While recent scholarship on the politics of education has highlighted features of political settlements and public governance, the analysis of education systems must feature a sociologically thick analysis of education systems that standard econometric approaches cannot provide. Vietnam suggests we stand to benefit from a still more encompassing analysis of how education systems and learning (or not learning) are embedded within specific social and institutional contexts.

5 THE CPV'S POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Giáo dục và đào tạo là quốc sách hàng đầu
(*Education and training development is the top national policy*)³

“Education,” announced the CPV in January of 1993 in Hanoi, at the Fourth Plenum of its Seventh Congress, “is Vietnam’s “first national policy priority.”⁴ This simple statement, voiced as Vietnam was exiting a period of acute economic crisis, carries a profound importance in Vietnam, and is familiar to the millions of people working in the country’s education system. On the one hand it speaks to the Party’s longstanding political commitment to education. On the other, to the party’s intention to commit itself further to the promotion of education. As we will observe, the CPV has since 1993 amply demonstrated its commitment to expanding the education system and increasing the accessibility of education at all levels.

The Party’s proclamation of education’s paramount performance also contains ambiguities whose exploration, we believe, is central for understanding the performance and politics of Vietnam’s education system around learning. Specifically, while the party’s political commitment to education is clear, the nature and origins of the intents and purposes of its education policies in relation to learning is less obvious. In this section of our analysis, we take up the task of unpacking key features of the politics of education in Vietnam and, within it, the nature of the CPV’s historic and contemporary political commitment to education and to learning. We proceed in three steps. We begin by establishing key features of Vietnam’s political settlement and explain the significance of these features to education policy and learning. Next, we examine the nature of the CPV’s political commitment to education. We find that the CPV has indeed demonstrated a striking political commitment to expanding the scale of education, but that ascertaining the evolution of the Party’s intents and purposes with respect to learning requires deeper inquiry into patterns of continuity and change and, increasingly, diversity in thinking and practice regarding learning within the CPV.

Our research supports three sets of claims. The first of these relates to the nature of Vietnam’s political settlement, which is widely understood as an instance of a single party dominant political settlement. We contend Vietnam’s political settlement is more aptly characterized as a communist corporatist political settlement and that doing so permits a better grasp of key features of education policy. The second set of claims is that the CPV, viewed in comparative international terms, has indeed demonstrated an extraordinary political commitment to education and that this is reflected both in material and ideational terms. The third set of

³ First put forward in the CPV’s Resolution 04-NQ/TW in 1993 and has become a commonly quoted phrase in the education discourse in Vietnam

⁴ <https://dangcongsan.vn/huong-toi-ky-niem-90-nam-ngay-truyen-thong-nganh-tuyen-giao/thong-tin-tu-lieu/giao-duc-va-dao-tao-la-quoc-sach-hang-dau-556376.html>

claims pertain to the origins and evolution of the intents and purposes of the CPV's education policies with respect to learning. We claim that while the CPV has indeed been demonstrably committed to promoting education, the relation between its favored policies and learning is profoundly ambiguous owing to the overwhelming orientation of the education system to the production of forms of consciousness conducive to the maintenance of its political monopoly. This, in turn, demands that an analysis of the politics of learning in Vietnam rests on a detailed analysis of the content and methods the education system deploys.

Extraordinary levels of political commitment and the uncertain origins of intent

Many features of Vietnam's education system and its performance around learning can be traced to specific features of Vietnam's single-party political settlement and the CPV's extraordinary and sustained commitment to education and its commitment to expanding access to education across regions. As in all countries, education policy in Vietnam is best understood as a form of political practice. And yet, with respect to its commitment to education, Vietnam appears to be an outlier. On the one hand, the Communist Party of Vietnam has over the past three decades placed education at the center of its political agenda. On the other, it has backed this commitment. The resources and energy the party devotes to education have been substantial, as we will observe in section four. For now we wish to note that, through its fiscal policies, Vietnam's central state redistributed resources to poorer regions more than states in most other developing countries have. In education, this has permitted rapid expansion in enrollment and in average years of schooling nationwide and a narrowing of gaps in enrollment across regions and urban and rural zones. Still, the character and motivations of CPV's commitment to education are complex and the effectiveness of its education policies with respect to the promotion of learning (as opposed to expanding enrollments) beg further exploration.

One question Vietnam's experience raises for policy and scholarly literature is the familiar question of the relation between features of political regime and social policy performance (McGuire 1993). In recent years this age-old question has been given new life in the context of studies of social orders, political settlements, and state effectiveness. Literature on state effectiveness shows, for example, that with respect to social policy performance, countries such as China (and Vietnam) and Cuba have done appreciably better than countries in their income groups (e.g. India, Brazil), while Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore all experienced rapid improvements in education and learning during periods of authoritarian rule. Notably, Singapore (still) and Taiwan (up until the later 1980s) were countries with political systems that were Leninist in their organization. This raises the intriguing question of whether countries with authoritarian and Leninist political structures and settlements perform better and why.

This line of questioning leads to a further round of questions about how and why states promote education. With respect to how, one striking feature of Vietnam's experience and an indicator of the CPV's political commitment has been the consistently high levels of public support given to education over the course of the last three decades. Today, public spending

on education in Vietnam stands in the range of 5.7 percent (in 2017) of an expanding GDP, compared with 3.6 for Indonesia (2015) and 2.6 for the Philippines (in 2012). Annually, education spending accounts (by formal requirement) for 20 percent of the state budget, although less is known about where the money goes.

The reasons for promoting education and, within it, learning, are a more complex matter. Education systems are multifunctional in that they can be used instrumentally with respect to the achievement of diverse goals. In virtually all countries, states' commitments to education reflect an awareness of its prospective contributions to economic growth and modernization. We attend to this aspect in this paper. It is also certain that a substantial part of Vietnam's leadership commitment to education has to do with the education system's societalization functions i.e. an education system's role in the promotion and dissemination of prevailing norms, values, and expectations. In Vietnam, as in other single-party states, the societalization functions of the education system are especially pronounced, as the ruling party places massive, sustained, and system-wide emphasis on promoting normative conformity. This is exemplified by the red scarf millions of Vietnamese (and Chinese and Cuban) students don daily to demonstrate their loyalty to the Communist Party and all Vietnamese students ubiquitous daily recitation of patriotic memes. Does the ubiquitous presence of a communist party that emphasizes modernization and the deep and everyday politicization of the education system explain Vietnam's strong learning outcomes?

While CPV's interest in promoting economic growth and the socializing functions of education may help to explain its political commitment to education, it is less helpful in explaining the performance of Vietnam's education system in promoting learning. Indeed, the lackluster performance of education systems in many lower- and middle-income countries have raised questions about whether learning is, in a practical sense, the true aim of education systems, or merely an announced aim?

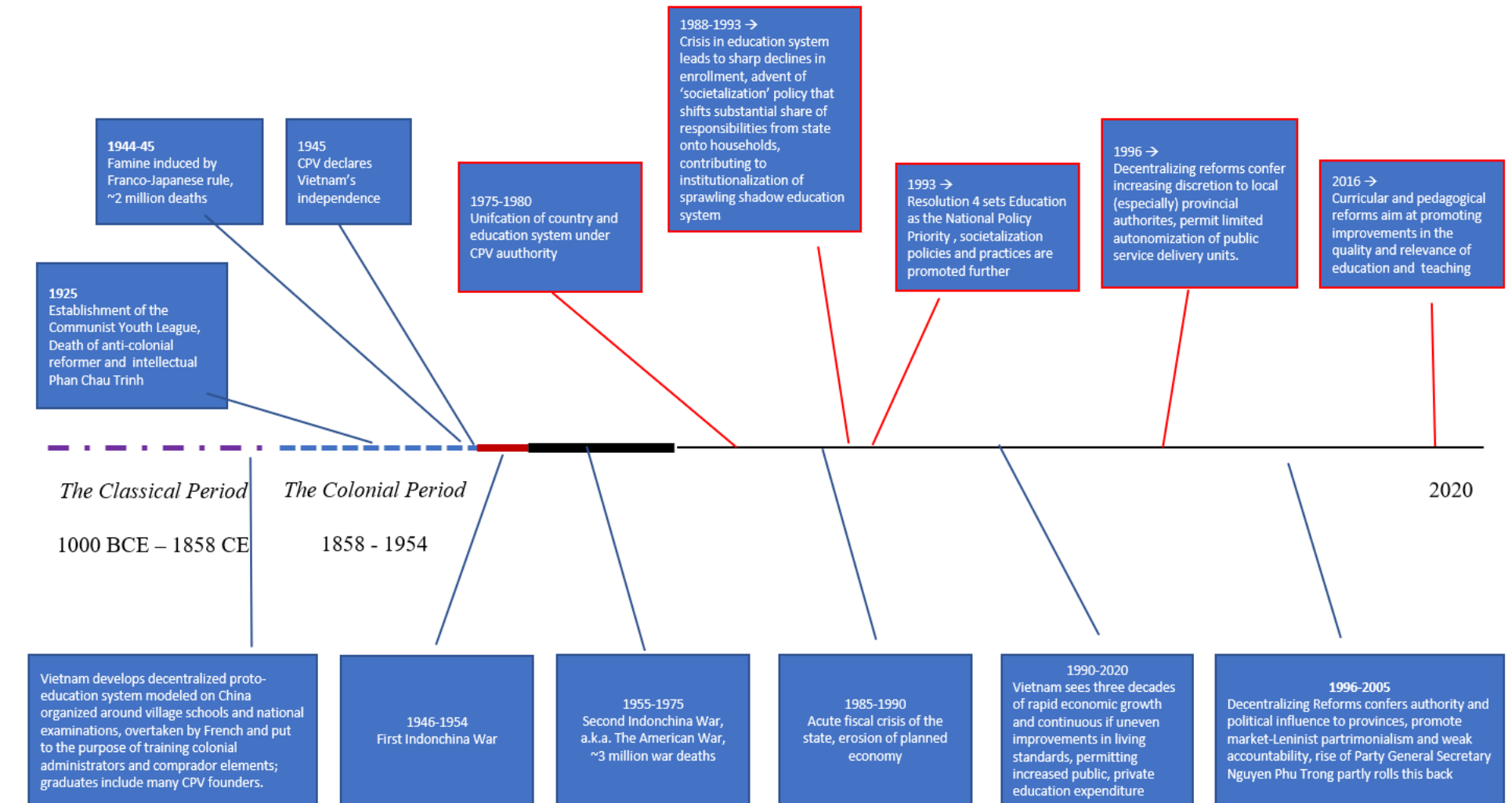
As a contributing paper to the RISE Programme's [*Political Economy of Adoption*](#) research cluster, this analysis aims to shed light on the origins, intentions, and purposes of the CPV's policies specifically with respect to the promotion of learning. From past to present, we aim to make sense of the origin of intents underlying Vietnam's education policies, by which we mean (for lack of a better way of expressing it) whether and to what extent the CPV has taken the promotion of learning per se "seriously," and why. We do this for three reasons. The first is in relation to education policy writ large and historically and in view of longstanding and more recent criticisms within Vietnam that the education system's orientation (*i.*) remains excessively oriented toward the absorption of information through memorization (or 'rote learning'), (*ii.*) that it effectively valorizes test-taking skills more than learning, (*iii.*) that it retains a curriculum overburdened with irrelevant knowledge and (*iv.*), that the promotion of learning is frequently construed in excessively competitive and even elitist ways, reflecting a heritage of vanguardism.

Second, we explore the question of intents in relation to the adoption of new ideas and practices in education policy, particularly as they relate to new curricula and teaching

methods and changing thinking about testing. Today, in contrast to the past, Vietnam's education sector reflects a diversity of perspectives on what constitutes a good education and on how best to promote learning. This is reflected in open and often spirited intellectual debates among education sector intellectuals and, perhaps somewhat surprising to some, the widespread willingness in the education system to employ curricula and methods of instruction drawn from other countries. In this respect, the current roll out of new curricula and the widespread, variegated, and controversial uptake of Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) teaching methodology are of interest. Within the RISE Vietnam CRT, researchers have explored how these new curricula and methods have been put into practice. In this paper, we consider some of the factors that have led to their adoption in the first place while also identifying (if not yet exploring) questions about local adoption and implementation.

This brings us to a final feature of the politics of learning (as opposed to the more general politics of education). Namely, how and under what conditions features of Vietnam's education system and its societal embeddedness are supportive of learning. In pursuit of these questions, this paper probes beyond the level of elite politics and policy making and into the working of the vastly complicated and subnationally diverse processes and relations that define Vietnam's education system.

Figure 2: Timeline of the Evolution of Vietnam's Education system



Vietnam's Political Settlement and its significance to the politics of learning

At first glance, the notion that features of a country's political settlement might rightly rank among the most important determinants of learning would seem wrong-headed. Reasons to look away from politics seem sensible enough: Aren't investments in schools and teachers and the quality of curricula and teaching practices ultimately more important than politics in determining an education system's effectiveness? Isn't it the case that learning can be effectively promoted under diverse forms of politics? Aren't school rooms and teachers and educational methods the most proximate causes of learning? And, shouldn't we therefore focus on these factors rather than obsessing about ultimately insoluble debates about what forms of politics are best? This seems to be the approach taken by Vietnam's development donors. For all of the impressive analyses of the country's education system executed over the last two to three decades, questions about the politics of education and learning are never explicitly addressed.

Ultimately, our interest in the politics of education and learning stems not from an interest in politics per se but rather how politics impinge on and shape patterns of learning across an education system. Emerging from within the broader literature on institutional change, social orders, and state effectiveness, research on political settlements with respect to education has sought to identify how features of power sharing that define countries' politics can shape the goals, conduct, and outcomes of education systems. Extended to the analysis of education systems, a political settlements perspective suggests that, while schools, teachers, curricula, and pedagogy and the resources that support them are vitally important, it is ultimately politics and political institutions and practices that form the institutional environment within which education systems' operations are embedded.

Political settlements at the level of national politics shape education in a variety of ways. These include features of elite politics and elite political priorities and policymaking as well as the vast number of processes and relations that occur within and outside the bounds of the state that are constitutive of an education system. For this reason, political settlements may be characterized as the "determinants of the determinants of proximate determinants of education and learning" or, more succinctly but still somewhat cryptically "third order determinants." The task taken up here is to establish the meaning of political settlements and their significance in relation to education systems, to grasp the nature and evolution of Vietnam's political settlement, and to identify in concrete terms its bearing on policies regarding the promotion of education and, within it, learning.

Political settlements in Vietnam: Reconstituting communist corporatism

Political settlements refer to the way elites share and exercise power in a particular setting. Political settlements figure centrally in shaping the evolution of social relations and institutions and hence the social environment within which an education is embedded. In any given setting, a country's prevailing political settlement will reflect that country's social history and, through its effects on institutions, shape preponderant features of policy making and implementation.

The character of political settlements and the way elites share power within varies across countries. In some instances, political settlements reflect voluntarism, i.e., they take the form of explicit agreements among power holders. More often, political settlements take the form of social historical stalemates or pacts among elites or even social classes. Correspondingly, Ferguson (2020, 3) defines political settlements as “shared understandings, relationships, and arrangements held among powerful parties to use politics, rather than violence, as their primary method for resolving disputes.”[i] Whereas Khan defines a political settlement as a distribution of power across organizations (2018, 640) that yields a “combination of [agentic and organizational] power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability (2010).” In an older understanding of political settlements that reflects elements of Marxist thought, Esping-Andersen (1990) defined political-class settlements to reflect the alignment of state interests with class fractions over time, even as political settlements do not tend to neatly align with class divisions.

Political settlements matter because they bear fundamentally on the character, form, exercise and outcomes of state power, with broad ramifications for institutional development and attendant features of social inequality (North et. al 2013, Boix 2015). [ii] Normative theories of political settlements have emphasized the advantages of democratic “open access” orders, wherein the presence of stable rules permits the development of efficient markets (North *ibid.*) By contrast, social orders absent such rules are more prone to chaos and violence and economic inefficiency.

In single party-dominant political settlements, ruling parties structure power and institutions in ways that explicitly prevent the rise of alternative ruling groups. One widely-observed variety of political settlement observed in lower- and middle-income countries and which will be of special interest in exploring Vietnam maybe broadly termed as state corporatism (Schmitter 1974, Brachet-Marquez 1994) or corporatist clientelism, wherein ruling elites “incorporate” various segments of society into the domination pact/ruling group as a way of building their political support base, thus forming a more or less clientelist redistributive coalition. Vietnam is in our view best understood as an instance of a single party-dominant communist corporatist political settlement, both in terms of the features of its Leninist party-state and its use of the party-state as a vehicle and strategy geared to the production and reproduction of political support. These essential elements do not tell us all of what we need to know about the character of the CPV and its political priorities but are nonetheless fundamental to the analysis of education and learning in Vietnam, as we will endeavor to show below.

We also will also argue, however, that the nature of Vietnam’s political settlement has changed significantly, with important implications both for the politics of education and for the politics of learning. We contend that, in the context of the country’s transformation into a more market-based social order, Vietnam ‘s political settlement has itself transformed. Specifically, the CPV’s political settlement has been reconstituted through a process in which mobilizational corporatism (Stromseth 1999, see, also, Kerkvliet 2018) has gradually if

incompletely given way to a market-Leninist form of corporatism (London 2020). In this process, the Party's revolutionary ideologies and mobilizationist organizational tactics have been supplanted by the Party's emerging understanding of its role as a champion of socialist-oriented market-based social order. It is in this context that contemporary Vietnam's education policies need to be understood

The CPV's extraordinary political commitment to education

Scholars of education policy have long noted its multi-functional character (Green 1990, Apple 2002). From the perspective of social control this owes to the need for states to shape citizens' behavior and expectations and conformity to dominant norms. More fundamentally, it owes to states' unrelenting and at times contradictory need to promote capital accumulation and welfare on the one hand while maintaining social control and promoting their subjective legitimacy on the other. This characteristic of states has been particularly noteworthy in literature on states in relation to peasants (e.g., de Janvry 1991), a seemingly "old" set of questions that nonetheless goes to the roots of states, state-formation, and education policy in late-industrializing societies.

Research into Vietnam's education system and the CPV's political commitment to education reflects this point. From its earliest instantiation as the Communist Youth League in 1925 through to its maturation as a revolutionary insurgent force, the CPV seized on education and the promotion of literacy, nationalism, and class-consciousness as a dimension of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle (Marr 1984; Dror, 2018). Subsequently, the CPV's efforts to construct a revolutionary socialist order hinged on the promotion of the "scientific" notion of new socialist man, even as its formulation frequently hinged on a stratified notion of education for the masses, on the one hand, and education for vanguard elements on the other (Hồng 1981). Thus, from its beginnings, and like communist parties elsewhere, the CPV has understood education policy itself as an instrument for both political leadership and class struggle and central to promoting socialist modernization across all fields, more about which below.

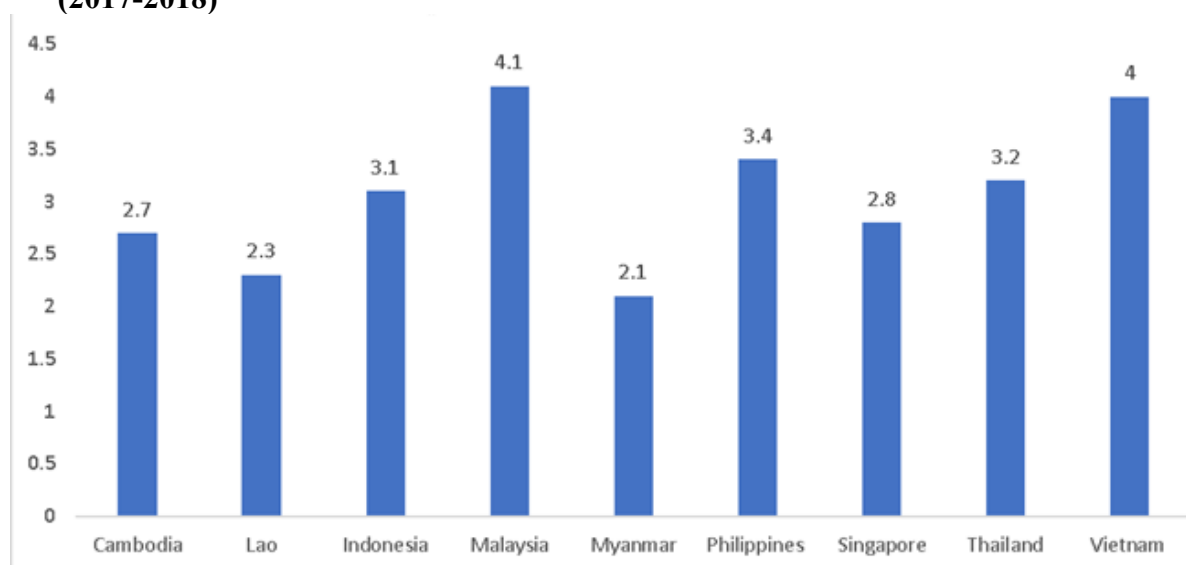
In the contemporary context and specifically in the context of the CPV's gradual embrace of a more market-based economy—a process that began in the late 1980s – the party has gradually reconceived the notion of "socialist man." The reformation and restoration of this concept in the market era was illustrated by the work of the Institute of Human Studies (Viện Nghiên cứu Con Người), under the leadership of Phạm Minh Hạc, who served as the CPV's Minister of Education during the crisis years of 1987 to 1990 and subsequently led numerous projects addressing this project.

Henceforth, driven by the practical demands of the movement to a market economy, the conception of the purpose of education policy and the education system became more explicitly concerned with the notion of "manpower," or "human resource," and even "human capital." Gradually, the CPV's sustained commitment to education came to reflect a more complex amalgam of socialist humanist elements and notions drawn from variants of

neoclassical economics, such as human capital theory (Author year). Hence the acknowledgement in a 1995 sociological analysis of the family of the importance of human capital in “family economics” (Tuan/VXHH 1995). The sense and reality of the need for new thinking regarding the purposes of education were crystalized in a conference on the world of work when a senior Vietnamese education official recalled a meeting with a Japanese diplomat when he was presented with a list of hundreds of distinctive occupational categories and quizzed on Vietnam’s current and projected performance in filling them. By the mid-1980s, the development of “manpower” for the explicit purposes of the modernization and industrialization project thus became a more recognizable concern and regular fixture of national development and education strategy (Trần and Lê 1996).

An additional indication of political commitment and a likely contributor to Vietnam’s record of performance has been that, while private spending on education continues to grow, the CPV has itself maintained high levels of public support for education, approaching 5.7 percent (in 2017) of an expanding GDP, compared with 3.6 for Indonesia (2015) and 2.6 for the Philippines (in 2012). Annually, education spending accounts (by formal requirement) for 20 percent of Vietnam’s state budget (Figure 2, below). Although how much of this amount is actually spent and how effective it is are often not revealed or made explicit even to high-ranking policy planners (interviews with national officials).

Figure 3: Public expenditure on education as a share of GDP in Southeast Asia (2017-2018)



Created from: World Development Indicators 2018

Series: Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)

While the transmission of dominant ideas is salient in all education systems, this aspect is extraordinarily marked in Vietnam. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that in Vietnam, the CPV regards education as a key instrument for the promotion of its own ideological assumptions including the beneficence of its permanent rule. One question that arises is whether and how it matters that *a* or (perhaps even) *the* primary aim of Vietnam's education system is to serve as an instrument for the production and reproduction of forms of consciousness conducive to the reproduction of Vietnam's political settlement. At all levels of education, the monitoring and inculcation of political ideas is pervasive. An intermediate interpretation is to affirm, then, is that part of the CPV's impressive political commitment to education stems from its perceived need to promote particular forms of political consciousness and social conformity as justifications of Vietnam's political system and patterns of social inequality therein. While education in capitalist democracies may be said, also, to communicate dominant ideas (Apple 1982), the ideological character of education systems in single party regimes is comparatively more visible and pronounced.

This does not, however, mean that the CPV's intentions have remained static. On the contrary, since the early 1990s the CPV's political commitment reflected an increasing commitment to improving living standards, reducing poverty, and promoting socioeconomic goals. More recently, state policy announces a concern with "human capital (VUSTA 2010)."⁵ We are interested, then, in ascertaining the nature and origins of contemporary Vietnam's

⁵ Vietnam union of Science and Technology Associations. "Vốn con người và đầu tư vào vốn con người." (Human capital and investment in human capital). < <http://vusta.vn/chitiet/hop-tac-doi-tac/Von-con-nguoi-va-dau-tu-vao-von-con-nguoi-608>>

political commitment to education and the mix of motivations that have characterized education policy making and implementation

The origins and intents of education policies and their relation to learning

The most specific notion of “origin of intent” refers to the elites’ and policymakers’ purposes in the adoption of education policies. In the context of the RISE programme’s working group on “the Political Economy of Adoption,” we are particularly interested in the conditions and circumstances that induce a government to “take learning goals seriously.” A glaring assumption contained in this formulation is that learning goals have indeed been taken seriously relative to other priorities. Our approach aims to ascertain motivations and behaviors within the CPV in the context of its dynamic political settlement and how these may have shaped the education system’s performance.

In this section, we will trace the nature of the CPV’s political commitment to learning through an exploration of its evolution. We are particularly interested in the rationales the party advances for its promotion of education including the Party’s increasing attention to an interest in new theories of learning and societal advancement, as is reflected in party’s use of such terms as “smart state” and “industrialization 4.0” and “lifelong learning” (Đặng 2018).

In our exploration of the CPV’s political commitment to education, however, we also attend to the importance of an education system’s ideological and socialization functions. In all states, the socialization functions of education are manifestly obvious. Education systems endeavor not only to teach children selected pieces of knowledge but also to train talents into skills. Education systems or schools more specifically are in the business of promoting dominant norms and expectations. Not only do they transmit dominant ideologies, but they also work to guarantee social stability and maintain current social order (Feinberg and Soltis 2004; Lall and Vickers 2009).

In the academic literature, inquiry into education policy has frequently centered on the policy process and the origin of intent that lay behind specific education policies (Bell and Stevenson 2006). This, in turn, is frequently accompanied by analysis of policy content to evaluate the appropriateness of policies as well as methods of policy research. In Vietnamese policy circles, debate frequently dances around, but rarely addresses, tensions and contradictions stemming from the need to promote critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and skills for a world market within an education system geared to promote normative conformity.

Furthermore, Vietnam’s experiences with respect to education and the ways education sector leaders have drawn on and debated different ideas is more nuanced than is often assumed. This can be seen in the backgrounds and approaches of leading education officials over the course of several decades, from the leading anthropologist (and non-Party member) Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Vietnam’s long serving and first minister of education (1946-1975), to the pronouncedly ideological Phạm Minh Hạc (1987-1990), to Hồ Ngọc Đại, the long-influential

and now controversial pedagogist and linguist and son in-law of Vietnam's longest serving party-secretary Le Duan.⁶

Over the last twenty years, debates within the party have increasingly focused on what kinds of knowledge students need in the context of a market economy that, the party insists, must be thoroughly subordinated to party structures. This brings us to the central question of the intents and purposes of education policy with respect to learning. Proceeding historically, one could focus on continuity and change in the CPV's education policies with respect to learning since its initial founding in 1925 (and official recognition by the Comintern in 1930), and how it has changed across key moments in the country's institutional evolution since (London 2011). The focus of the present analysis is on contemporary Vietnam, which is defined as Vietnam over the last 35 years or so, that is, dating back to 1985, the year the planned economy descended into crisis and the year prior to the Sixth Party congress, which is widely (if not unproblematically) viewed as a political breakpoint.

Analysis of primary data permits a more nuanced analysis of the intents and purposes of education in Vietnam since 1985 and the kinds of learning the education system is meant to promote. Several kinds of data may be considered. These include party platforms and resolutions and documents produced by (1) CPV agencies, such as the Central Committee for Propaganda, currently chaired by the former minister of Education, (2) the stated aims of major education policies, including the Law on Education, and the aims of specific initiatives aimed at promoting gains in learning. Here we observe Vietnam's education policies multi-functional character, with its focus on expanding access to education and, promoting normative conformity and idealized principles of socialist citizenship (as noted above), the promotion of national development under the leadership of the party, and increasing rhetorical emphasis on the advancement of new approaches to education and learning while still maintaining a focus on Party leadership.

The development of a socialist citizenry as a and perhaps *the* primary aim of education is articulated in the Law on Education (1995, 2005). Nevertheless, the concept of the socialist citizenship has been reconfigured with changes reflecting the country's social and economic transformations since Doi Moi and an increasing awareness of the need for new skills. Hence,

⁶ For example, in Hồ Ngọc Đại's case, we observe changing views on how best to educate Vietnam's children and whether a text book whose first edition was published in 1978 and first used experimentally in 2006 and sporadically in 2017 and 2018 was suitable. Đại's pedagogical approach is unusual, but his political influence has permitted him to influence policy. In an interview with the first author, Đại emphasized the merits of his distinctive approach, noting that one of the principal advantages of studying in the Soviet Union during the 1960s was his ability to access the collected works of John Dewey. More recently, Đại was embroiled in a roiling and unprecedentedly public debate with other senior scholars and education officials who rejected his proposed textbook on the grounds that it did not meet current needs. While the detailed discussion about Dai's pedagogical approach is beyond the scope of this paper, the incident and the broader debate concerning the desired content of new curricula and textbooks reflects how contentious even technical aspects of education policy and pedagogy has become.

since the early 2000s, the CPV has stated its intent to improve learning and teaching, to create young citizens who are “independent, active and creative,” and to provide a highly skilled, productive and adaptive workforce for the national modernization project (MOET, 2001; SRV, 2001). Since 2011, the Party has exhibited a willingness to experiment with alternative pedagogies, as is seen in the development of Vietnam’s version of Escuela Nueva (VNEN), which has been adopted by thousands of schools and whose implementation has itself given rise to spirited debates about appropriate pedagogical practices.

This emphasis is seen in system wide reforms initiated in 2002, 2008, and 2012 (MOET, 2008; 2012). For example, in the 2002 reform, much attention was placed on active learning with practices aiming to develop students' independent thinking and autonomous learning. The ‘Innovating teaching methods’ campaign, since the mid-2000s, has encouraged teachers to update pedagogies to ‘promote activeness, autonomy, and creativity in students and turn learning into self-study with the guide and control of teachers’ (MOET 2008, 19). The “emulation movement” to develop ‘friendly schools, active students’ launched in 2008, has called for a healthy learning environment to bring about positive learning experiences and cultivate independent, creative and critical thinkers.

While continuing to stress the importance of hard work and solidarity -- central qualities of idealized socialist citizenship, the idealized notions of Vietnamese good citizenship encapsulates the spirit of ‘entrepreneurship’ and expects traits of a ‘high quality human resource’ (Duong, 2019). Although this conceptualization might be influenced by the recommendations put forward by international organizations and donors (see e.g., WB, 2016), it is always reframed in a way that closely adheres to the national reform agenda. As such, the right to work, to study, and to develop oneself ultimately means obligations to selflessly contribute to the stated goals and priorities of the Party, i.e., to “meeting the requirements of the industrialization and modernization of the socialist oriented market economy and international integration”, and ultimately of building “a wealthy people, a strong, democratic, equal, and civilized/modern nation” (dân giàu, nước mạnh, dân chủ, công bằng, văn minh) (CPV 2013).

Summary reflections on the political economy of adoption

Our analysis suggests that, for the CPV, the origin of intent with respect to the promotion of education and learning has always been and largely remains the creation of a mechanism for instilling values of normative conformity and the development of instrumentalities for promoting specific (often highly formal) kinds of knowledge deemed to be essential to the achievement of modern and (presumptively) scientific knowledge. The manner in which this aspect of intentionality has translated into policy has varied over time. Over the last three decades and especially within the last two decades, there has been a gradual engagement with new ideas regarding learning. However, the ideals of normative conformity and scientism remain salient features of education policy (which are theoretically and conceptually informed

by Scientific Socialism (Chủ nghĩa xã hội khoa học”) of Marx and Lenin.⁷ In the current context, the central paradox of education policy and specific initiatives to promote gains in learning traces to tensions and contradictions stemming from the need to promote critical and independent thinking and the political imperative of maintaining social control and training normative conformity.

The first of these observations is that while CPV has been demonstrably committed to expanding access to education, particularly at basic levels, the intents and purposes of its education policies have been heavily geared toward the transmission of state ideologies and normative orientations rather than promoting learning per se. For several decades, for example, the Party’s principal intent and purpose appeared to center on the cultivation of an intellectual elite and, for the masses, the promotion of idealized citizens under the banner of “new socialist man.” While Vietnam is hardly unique in this respect, our aim is to gain greater clarity about the politics of learning in Vietnam so as to more adequately grasp the dynamics of its education system’s performance around learning.

By contrast however, we along with others have observed that Vietnam’s education policies over the last three decades and particularly within the last ten years reflects a gradual, uneven, though nonetheless significant transformation of intent wherein the heavy emphasis of promoting ideology has been accompanied by a willingness to adopt new curricular and pedagogical strategies. We note that, as in many countries, Vietnam’s political elites’ and policymakers’ statements regarding the importance of education carry fundamental ambiguities regarding the meaning of education, the intents and purposes of education policy, and the meaning and place of learning within it. Overall, our aim is to make better sense of how features of politics in Vietnam and of the nature of the CPV’s political commitment to education and the intents and purposes of policies in the Vietnam context have shaped the country’s performance around education.

⁷ According to Marxist-Leninist theorists, scientific socialism lies within the concept of “socialism,” one of the three components of Marxism-Leninism, which studies social dynamics aimed at abolishing capitalism, building a socialist society, and moving towards a communist society (Scientific Socialism, Ministry of Education and Training, National Politics-Truth Publisher, 2006, p. 10)

6. PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

We seek to better understand how the nexus of politics and public governance and, within it, decision making processes and management practices that occur among and within public organizations involved in the education system bear on the implementation of education policies in a way that bears on learning outcomes. We seek to locate these practices in relation to the CPV's long standing political commitment to education and to understand the evolution of the intents and purposes of the Party's education policies with respect to learning. We view this aspect to be a crucial consideration for understanding Vietnam's education system's relation to stakeholders in its broader societal environment.

Public governance in this context refers to “[t]he ways in which stakeholders interact with each other in order to influence the outcomes of public policies.” (Bovaird and Löffler 2003). A key feature of efforts to enhance the effectiveness of education systems' performance globally lies in the analysis of public sector management and, more specifically, the internal functions and interaction among multiple stakeholder organizations in education systems across a range of “policy design elements” deemed important in the determination of learning outcomes.⁸ In the RISE conceptual framework these are defined as delegation, finance, support, information, motivation, and support.

Public governance and accountability relations

In the policy literature, public governance comprises features of social relations and formal and informal institutions that shape conduct and outcomes of public policy and, in the context of education, the development, daily operations, and performance of education systems. A key insight from recent literature is that features of public governance across, and even within, countries can powerfully shape the coherence or incoherence of education systems for learning.

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

⁸ Pritchett (2015)

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

Despite these concerns, there are many other features of Vietnam's political settlement and political system that support the education system's coherence for learning. Among these is undoubtedly Vietnam's distinctively Leninist framework, in which the organization and operation of official government structures and service delivery units⁹ is interpenetrated by structures and organs of the communist party. The suggestion here is that having both official government structures *and* a perpetual organized parallel political process within them makes "management" relationships within the bureaucracy more accountable to national political priorities than might be the case in a purely top-down government bureaucracy (even in a democratic polity), where local officials, managers, and service-delivery might not "give a hoot" about education or learning and may face no countervailing political force.

This possibility is intriguing when we compare features of public governance and education in Vietnam with other countries. For example, one of the noted features of Vietnam's education system is the professionalism of its education workforce. Teachers show up on time and are driven by a professional ethos, in part because Vietnam's political organization demands consistent attention to education from the level of policymaking to the daily management of Vietnam's 63 provinces, 700+ districts, 11,000+ communes, and urban wards, and to its tens of thousands of schools. The same cannot be said for most countries.

In the context of a large country with a significantly decentralized fiscal and administrative system, like Vietnam (and, for that matter, most if not all of the RISE countries) the implementation of education policies involves continuous decisions among a diversity of stakeholders that themselves may vary in their functions, capacities, orientations, and interests. Ideally, the process of researching education systems can be conceived as being itself a problem-based process of learning and iterative adaptation, wherein education system stakeholders can identify and address accountability gaps that enhance an education system's coherence for learning.

In the present research, we aim to clarify what political commitments look like across a variety of scales within an education system and how their features shape education sector

⁹ Service delivery units were originally set up within public service providers at the grassroots level for services staff to undertake income-generating practices to sustain services delivery and support livelihoods. Later, their operations became institutionalized with the societalization policy.

priorities and policy implementation processes sub-nationally, and down to the school level. Notionally, the aim of a program of research along these lines would seek to establish, insofar as is possible, how variation in the intents and purposes of local authorities and education sector managers and features of subnational accountability relations across a variety of scales, levels of authority, and local stakeholder relations affect features of education and learning. In the present paper our aims, more modestly, are to establish key features of how this all works in Vietnam.

At a general level, we seek a better grasp of how features of politics as they are expressed through accountability relations among and within public organizations shape decisions and practices that affect learning outcomes. To organize our analysis, we explore features of public governance across three specific sets of accountability relations within an education system. The first of these corresponds to relations between political elites (including elite politicians and policy makers) on the one hand and national and local agencies that delegated the responsibility of implementing education policies on the other. This set of relations corresponds with the notion of “**compact**” in the RISE conceptual Framework, wherein “compact” refers to a covenant or contract or agreement or understanding between two or more parties to do or forebear something.¹⁰

The second two sets of relations fall under the category of **management**. In our analysis we are interested in two distinct sets of management relations which, in turn, have their own internal complexities. The first of these, which encompass both meso-level and front-line managers, concerns relations within and among organizations responsible for the implementation of education policies and also relations between these organizations and schools. For lack of a suitable term, we refer to this as **meso-level and front-line management**. Beyond this we are concerned with **school management**, which addresses decision making practices and accountability relations within schools, including the relation between school administrators and teachers.¹¹

Our analysis is organized as follows. We begin with an overview of features of Vietnam’s party-state and the organization of the education system within it. We identify the parts of Vietnam’s party-state and education system that are relevant to the dimensions of relations and policy design elements as specified above. Taking up these relations and elements one by one, we explain how the organization of Vietnam’s party-state and the institutionalized practices that define the education system can bear on the functioning of the education system across these relations, highlighting both formal rules and institutional practices. Turning to the empirical analysis and drawing on general and case study materials, we highlight the opportunities and challenges fiscal and administrative (and, in respects, political)

¹⁰ According to the Oxford English Dictionary.

¹¹ These accountability relations correspond with accountability relations that define the “compact” and “management” dimensions of the RISE Conceptual Framework (Pritchett 2005, 17). For our purposes, “management” is of interest both with respect to relations between bureaucratic agencies and schools and within schools, between administrators and teachers.

decentralization has presented with respect to promoting greater system coherence for learning. We conclude by highlighting features of public governance that help and harm coherence.

How politics animates the inner workings of Vietnam's education system

Across and within countries, the performance of education systems is conditioned by how political processes affect accountability relations within an education system on a variety of social scales. What makes Vietnam different from most other low- and middle-income countries is the nature of its political system itself, which is a recognizably Leninist party-state. Vietnam's political system, however, is increasingly decentralized, which poses problems for localities' accountability to national education policy goals. While the country's Leninist party-state is uniform in its organization, features of its embeddedness and levels of its performance vary across and within regions.

While a great deal of attention is rightly given to education policy and features of policy making and implementation, there are many other aspects of politics that fundamentally condition education systems performance around learning. Scholarly and policy literature has usefully distinguished between different forms of political settlements, including "single party-dominant" settlements, of which Vietnam would certainly be an exemplar. Recognition of this aspect is necessary but insufficiently informative. Features of politics and power relation within different political settlement forms and their specific instantiations need to be fleshed out. Doing so entails attention not only or even mainly to the formal arenas of politics (e.g., procedural maneuvers, voting, and policymaking), but also to power relations and that animate the meso and micro levels of education systems, including relations between and within bureaucratic organizations and schools. Attention, too, is needed, to the mix of formal and informal institutions in shaping the conduct and outcomes of education policies.

Features of Vietnam's party state

The CPV governs Vietnam through a sprawling party-state apparatus defined by organizational features that trace to the Soviet Union and which, notwithstanding differences, resemble China's communist party-state. An intriguing general question (which will be returned to in the concluding section of this paper) is whether single-party states and, within them, single party states with recognizably Leninist features fare better in promoting system coherence for learning. Notably, in the East Asia context, Taiwan (under the KMT until the late 1980s) and Singapore (until this day) are countries whose political systems' organizations were directly modeled on the template of a Leninist party-state. In the Western Hemisphere, Cuba is another obvious case.

The CPV is Vietnam's dominant organization and has shaped the country's institutions more than any other actor or social force. Since its founding in 1925 as the Revolutionary Communist Youth League, the party has sought to achieve and maintain political dominance and, to this end, has set in place organizational structures to achieve its political goals. The CPV's influence on social life in Vietnam has unfolded through processes of state-formation

and transformation that have extended across decades and endured periods of war and, more recently, movement from a centrally-planned economy largely isolated from world trade to a more market-based economy geared toward commodity production for the world market. Many of the most striking features of contemporary Vietnam's transformation are visible in its economy, and three successive decades of rapid economic growth have permitted continuous expansion in the flow of resources into the education system. Another felicitous condition of Vietnam's education system's recent evolution has been elite politicians and policymakers' political commitment to education, as has been observed in the preceding discussion.

However, in making sense of the performance of Vietnam's education system around learning we require a nuanced appreciation of the politics of public governance as it unfolds across various scales, including an appreciation of key relationships of accountability within the formal bounds of the education system. In what follows, we establish the organization of Vietnam's political system and illustrate the way it works across three key relationships of accountability and design elements within them.

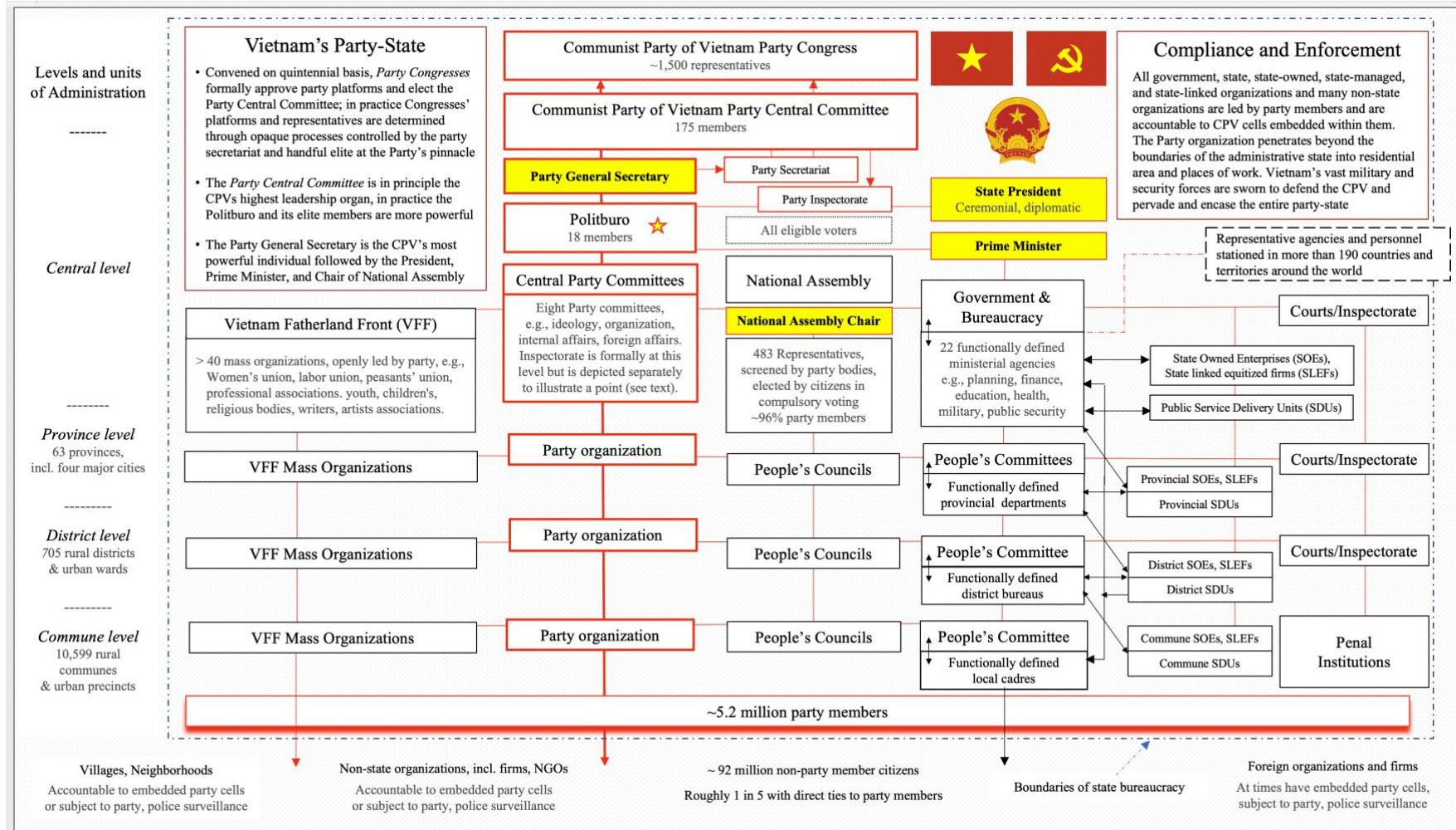
The CPV rules Vietnam through a sprawling party-state apparatus that the party has formed and put into use over the course of decades. The formation and subsequent transformation of the party-state under the CPV's rule and, with it, the CPV party-state's organizational and ideational features, have figured centrally in the emergence and transformation of Vietnam's post-colonial and postwar education systems. Formal features of the CPV party-state are established in Vietnam's Constitution[i] (last amended in 2013) and innumerable formal documents (see London 2014, Croissant and Lorenz 2018). Thus, Article 4 of the Constitution establishes that "The Communist Party of Vietnam - the vanguard of the worker class, working people and Vietnamese nation, the faithful representative of their interests, grounded on Marxist Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, is the leading force of the state and society." Other parts of the constitution restate this principle.

Organizationally, the party-state can be succinctly conceived as comprising five distinct but operationally interwoven and vertically and horizontally integrated organizational domains within the encompassing structure of the party state. As shown in Figure 3 (below), these include (1) the party organization and its agencies; (2) a nominally representative party-dominated legislative sector; (3) a party-appointed and managed government and bureaucracy; (4) party-subordinated legal and inspectorate systems; and (5) and party-run mass organizations. Party-run security, military, policing, and defense units pervade each branch and together encase the entire apparatus.

The party-state is rightly understood as Leninist in that its organization and activities match state forms and practices advocated and put into practice by Lenin and Stalin. As will also be observed below, however, Vietnam's recognizably Leninist party-state reflects elements specific to Vietnam. Indeed, the party has been and remains a complex organization that is animated by diverse interests, motivations, and sensibilities. In what follows, the paper provides an overview of the party-state's organization, establishes key features of the party

organization, its membership and ruling ideas. It also presents an abbreviated overview of the array of agencies that make-up the party-state, which is essential for understanding what the CPV does when it rules.

Figure 4: The Organization of Vietnam's Party State



From London (2022)

Vietnam's bureaucracy extends across four levels of administrative authority, from the central level, to the province/city level, and beyond, to the district/ward and commune/precinct level. The party's branches and cells extend further still, through committees and cells that are present across all social fields, in virtually all organizations[i], and in all areas of human settlement. Specifically, Vietnam's party-state comprises 63 provinces (including Vietnam's five largest cities^[iii]); roughly 705 districts and urban wards (of which 170 are classified as urban wards or provincial levels towns), and roughly 10,599 communes (of which 2,335 were classified as urban precincts or commune centers) (GSO 2020). Below the lowest rung of bureaucratic administration lie tens of thousands of smaller residential areas or clusters that, while not following a national labelling regime, form a key part of the party-state apparatus. These include rural hamlets (variously called *thôn*, *xóm*, *làng*, *bản*, *buôn*, *ấp*) and urban settlement clusters (*tổ dân phố*). While not formally a level of government administration, these units are part of the party-state's local political, administrative, and security functions.

The Party is a hierarchical organization whose functions reflect centralized and decentralized features as well as a mix of formal and informal aspects. Vietnam's Politburo (*Bộ Chính Trị*) is the Party's and Vietnam's most powerful political body. The Politburo is chaired by the Party's General Secretary, who is the Party's and Vietnam's most powerful individual.^[iii] In principle the Party Congress is the Party's highest political organization, followed by the Party's 175-member Central Committee (CC) and its executive body, the Party Secretariat. The Party Congress is convened every five years or so while the Central Committee (CC) meets periodically between congresses in CC plenums. The Politburo is formally accountable to the CC and the Party Congresses. Whereas in practice the Politburo dominates and selects the members of both bodies. As in China and Cuba, Vietnam's Party congresses are largely rubber stamp affairs. Within the politburo, the four highest ranking members (known informally as Vietnam's "four pillars") include, in addition to the general secretary, those appointed to the positions of state president, prime minister (of the government), and chair of the National Assembly. The remainder of the politburo typically comprises a mix of military and police officials, ideologues, and those with other key functional portfolios, such as minister of foreign affairs, Party secretaries of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and so on. In recent years, the representation of military and police leaders on the politburo has increased.

By 2021, the CPV had more than 5.2 million members. But this figure understates the party's influence. If we take into account the total number of persons with direct family links to a CPV member, the number of persons with direct links to the party approaches or exceeds 20 million. This means that at least a fifth of the country's nearly 100 million-strong population has direct party links. Since the 1950s, the party's broad-based membership and reach has had the practical effect of actively incorporating a large share of the population into the country's dominant political settlement. Hence, while the Party monopolizes power, it is inclusive in this specific if limited respect. Indeed, since assuming power in the north of the country in the 1950s, the CPV may be understood as a sprawling and expanding form of communist corporatism, in that it cultivated and won political support, loyalty, and deference by mobilizing and incorporating its members into hierarchical structures of formal authority,

status, and privilege (Stromseth 1998).

Three additional features of the party's membership bear emphasis. First, as mentioned in the first chapter of this volume, while the party's legitimacy was initially founded on anti-colonial struggle, anti-imperialist war, and revolutionary socialism, the vast majority of the country's population and the party's membership was born after 1986 and are connected to the past by party lore rather than direct experience. Second, although the CPV controls and enjoys significant support across all regions, the Party's membership has been and remains unevenly distributed geographically, however. Specifically, party membership remains most concentrated in the north-central, Red River Delta, and northwest mountainous regions and least concentrated in the south central, southeast, Central Highlands, and Mekong River Delta. The variable regional density of Party membership gives different regions different feels. Finally, while sworn to defend the party, and while subject to party norms and compliance procedures, the CPV's five million members vary considerably in their life experiences and normative orientation. Though we lack an evidentiary basis to assess this aspect of the party, students of contemporary Vietnam will recognize this statement as fact.

Ideas do not exist independently of social relations and the ideas the CPV has used to promote its political aims need to be understood in relation to the Party's exercise of power. With respect to ideology, the Party's consistent embrace of Leninist doctrine, aspects of Marxism, and various trappings of Ho Chi Minh thought reflect not abstract ideas, but a deep and longstanding organizational ethos and a particular approach to governance grounded in the assumption of the party's indispensability. The CPV dominates social relations across all social fields. It determines policy priorities nationally and locally according to the notion that it alone is capable of grasping and representing the nation's democratic aspirations. The CPV exercises power according to Leninist organizational principles whereby the organs and cells of the Party pervade and dominate all corners of the body politic, comprehensively subordinating social life to the Party's specified aims. Party discourse and symbols (including Leninist iconography) pervade in all public spaces, while offices of state agencies are festooned with banners amplifying party messages. Relationally, organizationally, and in ideological terms the party-state is recognizably and proudly Leninist, even as Vietnam's particular brand of Leninism and its Marxist content has reflected the particular needs of the party at various stages of its evolution.

From past to present, the Party has sought to enthrone its members with principles of Leninist vanguardism, a function that is achieved through regular meetings of party cells and specialized agencies and training schools. The Party's Central Committee on Propaganda and Ideology is among the Party organization's key agencies and is tasked with promoting loyalty to the party, both within the ranks, and in the broader population. Operationally, the Party's ideological organs and functions are charged with the task of controlling speech and thought using regularly enforced compliance mechanisms ranging from regular meetings in places of work and residence, veneration of the party at public events and ceremonies, and coordinated expressions of reverence that often take on features of a political religion (Dror 2016). The Party controls who can rise to positions of power in all instances. Across the country and

around the clock, the Party broadcasts ideals of what it means to be a civilized citizen (Bradley 2004). In many parts of the regions, neighborhoods and families conforming to Party ideals and metrics are issued banners or certificates conferring their status of “cultured villages, neighborhoods” (*làng văn hóa, khu dân cư văn hóa*) or “cultured families” (*gia đình văn hóa*) at events held in Party run cultural centers (*nhà văn hóa*) (Huynh 2005).

In the education system, students are subject to comprehensive indoctrination and the children of the political elite along with high performing students are channeled into the party system. There is, in other words, an official culture of conformity that the CPV as an organization promotes continuously through a variety of channels, all day and every day.

As in any state, political rituals are an important aspect of social life in Vietnam. As in other authoritarian countries and communist party-states, political ritual in Vietnam is especially pronounced, while Party-friendly political messages are unremittingly broadcast across a range of media outlets, from loudspeakers to social media and state-run text messaging apps. Those within Vietnam’s party-state live lives suffused by Party ideas and symbolism and the Party relentlessly promotes its legitimacy via a diverse array of means. The Party’s Ideology Committee plays an active and high-profile role in the education system and in regulating public discourse and the mass media.

Beyond its formal institutions and organization, the mix of ideals, representations, and symbols that attend the CPV’s rule are essential to understanding its character. From top to bottom it is enthused by a religiously ingrained faith in the notion that the Party is the sole legitimate representative of Vietnam’s people, and in the idea that the Party possesses a morality that makes it uniquely capable of leading the country. The CPV presents itself as a dictatorship of the proletariat and the sole champion of Vietnam’s independence. This is not empty talk. On a practical level, functional agencies and all levels and local units of governments are charged with dispensing their activities and budgetary priorities in accordance with the spirit of the Party’s resolutions. For example, local party-state organs are expected to comply with and embrace Party dictates, indicating the need to prioritize specific policies. Elsewhere, for example, we have argued that the presence of a perpetual political process (through the Party cells) within the education system amounts to a countervailing force that can (though does not always) generate enhanced accountability to education policy goals. In Vietnam, Party structures and processes are employed to hold schools, principals, and teachers to account, an element that is missing in other Southeast Asian countries and, indeed, in most in the world (London 2020).

An examination of reporting practices in the political and managerial oversight of schools and teachers illustrates this point. It is customary that schools are required to submit an annual plan to supervisory authorities (e.g., provincial- and district-level education authorities), detailing the outcomes that schools will strive to achieve by the end of the school year. These achievement targets (often resembling “physical production targets” of the central planning era), are then typically aligned with spending proposals, e.g., to determine how many teachers shall get training, meet the teachers’ standards, and ultimately be awarded the “Excellent

Teaching” title. Political targets also shape how many students shall pass the graduation exam and even how many outstanding students there will be. Often, this plan is treated (and inspected accordingly) as a political obligation rather than a tentative proposal to the point that most school leaders and teachers feel the need to “fulfil the assigned tasks” for fear of being disciplined by the Party unit or demoted or kicked down the professional ladder. While aspects of these political methods seem antithetical to the promotion of learning, and rather appear as formalistic and empty “on stage” behavior (Goffman 1959), it is nonetheless the case that these political commitments carry real weight, as they are regularly discussed in the “political work” of schools and bureaucratic agencies throughout the system.

Over the course of its history and up to the present, the CPV has assiduously cultivated the notion of its indispensability into an ideological straitjacket,^[1] according to which the Party alone decides how reality, history, and socialism should be correctly understood. An important corollary of these ideas is the widely promoted belief that any existing or potential political opposition must be eliminated and that the country is under constant threat of “peaceful evolution” (*diễn biến hòa bình*) – a phrase attributed to American’s intent on pushing Vietnam toward capitalist democracy. The result is that social life in Vietnam unfolds within an ambient sense of political paranoia, a sense actively encouraged by most units within the Party, who are indeed incentivized to keep this paranoia alive. To give one illustration, in recent years the Party has banned the use of the term “civil society” (*xã hội dân sự*) in any and all official documents, including all forms of press. In 2018, a circular distributed to local security agencies in a central Vietnam province warned of the need to guard against non-violent civil society groups, equating them with terrorist organizations.

Party work: The CPV’s commitment to education and learning in practice

The CPV directly and indirectly affects every aspect of education in Vietnam and an analysis of the politics of education and learning requires an appreciation of these influences across the range of relationships that constitute the education system. For the moment, three illustrations of the party’s influences on the coherence of the education system will be considered, with further elaboration in future drafts. First, while the complexities of the intents and purposes of the CPV’s education policies have been addressed in the preceding section, evidence shows the party as a champion of education and particular approaches to learning are prominently seen, perhaps most strikingly in the significant public expenditures the party earmarks for education and the strongly redistributive manner in which budgetary resources are allocated across provinces.

Second, at the level of management relations with the education system, the structures and processes of the Party as it is embedded within the education system ensure constant attention to education policy norms and goals. While this does not mean that local policy makers’ priorities and practices always support the promotion of learning, it does mean that processes of policy implementation, reporting, evaluation keep a constant eye on proscribed norms. Third, at the micro-level - which for reasons below we will suggest can also be understood as the “cellular level,” the presence of Party politics is used to monitor, discipline, and reward

members of the education sector workforce. While only a minority of education bureaucrats and teachers are party members, most education leaders or administrators are party-members or key members of grassroot party-cells who play a role in steering decision making and in monitoring and evaluating the performance of organizations and individuals.

In Vietnam, the work of party-cells is an integral feature of all organizations and the education sector is no exception. We can even speak of the cellular promotion of learning through the Party in schools and bureaucratic authorities. It bears emphasis that the presence of the party does not ensure learning and in many provinces there is actually low accountability from provinces to center. Notionally, one could take this research further and look at features of CPV activities in provinces and in districts and in communes and schools.

The promise and perils of decentralization

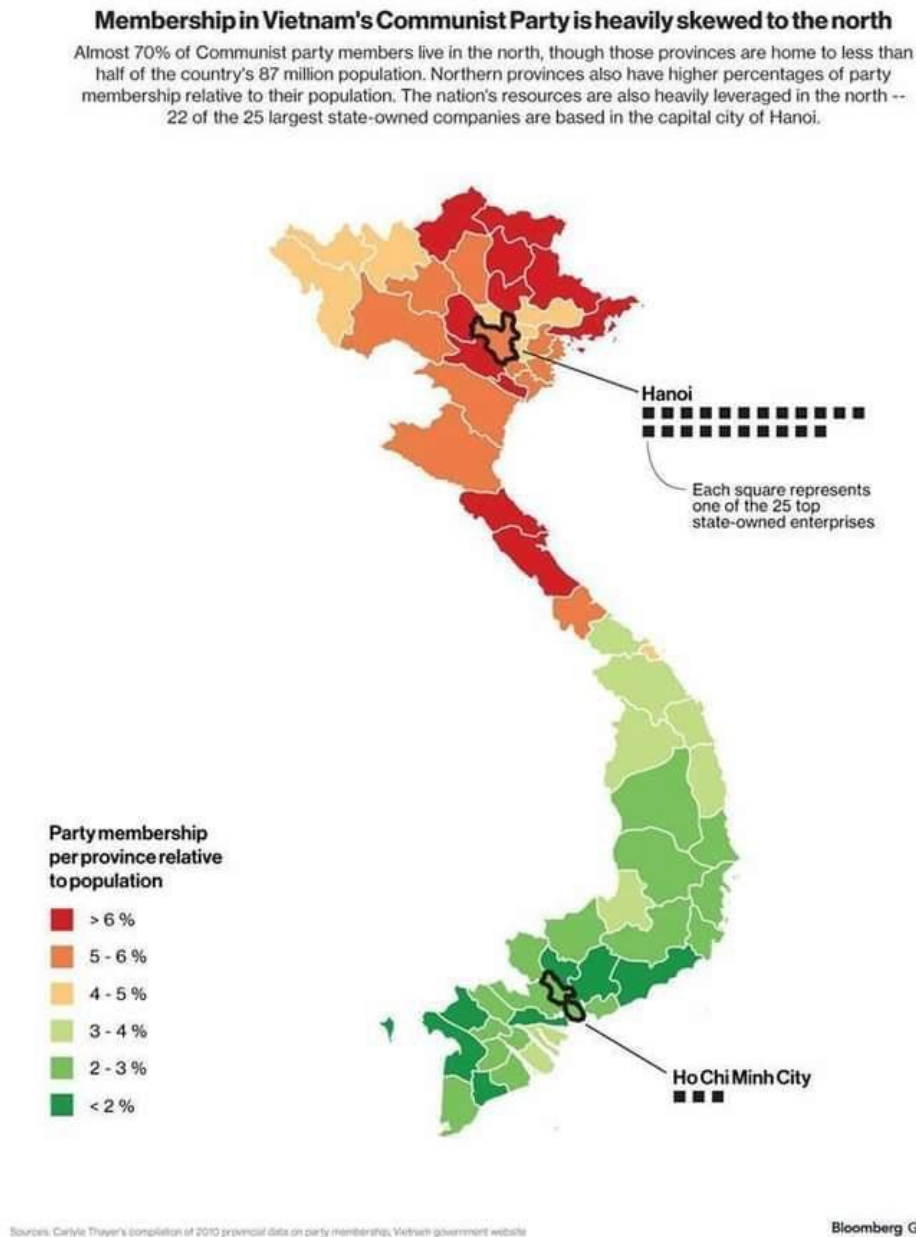
One of the striking features of public governance in Vietnam over the past three decades has been its movement toward fiscal and (in respects) political decentralization. On the one hand this has conferred greater autonomy to local authorities and (sometimes) schools. On the other it has introduced problems of local accountability with respect to national political priorities. We explore how the CPV, nationally and at the local levels, has sought to balance tendencies toward decentralization while also promoting adherence to a set of norms, particularly regarding the Party's stated commitment to the promotion of quality education for all. We examine ways in which these efforts appear more or less successful, focusing on processes dictating the establishment and financial support for educational priorities, the development and use of Education Management and Information Systems for evaluation and monitoring, and the evaluation of and support for teachers at various levels of administration.

One of the interesting implications of decentralization is the appearance of diversification of practices subnationally and, by extension, differences in the performance of education systems across and within regions. While education systems are always embedded, features of their embeddedness will always vary across time and place, as has been observed in international research. In the Vietnam context, regions differ with respect not only to socioeconomic conditions but also features of local education systems. While preliminary, our analysis of features of public governance in the Vietnam context explores aspects of these differences through reference to the experiences of three localities: The northeastern port city and districts of Haiphong (Vietnam's third largest city, population 2.02 million), the north-central province of Nghe An (Vietnam's largest province by area, population 3.54 million) and Kien Giang (the most Southeasterly province, population 2.2 million).

Considering the discussion of party politics above, subnational research raises possibilities for within-country comparisons. For example, the hypothesis concerning the role of party politics (as is Figure 5, below) in the promotion of accountability begs the question of whether variable densities of party membership are associated with performance on such indicators as enrollments and learning outcomes. Below, we consider how a mix of varying material conditions, different responses to formal norms, and various forms of informal practices can

vary across and within regions, through a brief exploration of four crosscutting issues: subnational education finance, teacher policies, testing, and the rollout of curricular reforms.

Figure 5: Regional distribution of communist party membership



Subnational education finance

In Vietnam, subnational education finance is formally regulated mainly by the 2015 Law on State Budget (LSB) and the 2019 Law on Education.¹² According to the LSB, a province's People's Council is to decide on the allocation of the total budgeted amount on capital and current expenditures for each sector (including education) and for each government agency

¹² The following points draw on Exploring Coherence for Learning in a Decentralized System Evidence From Vietnam ~ RISE WORKING PAPER* ~ DRAFT 1.0 Jonathan London, Pham Thi Thanh Hai, Nguyen Hoang Phuong, , Dang Thi Thanh Huyen

(Article 30) and on additional fund transfers to local governments for budget-balancing or targeted purposes. A provincial People's Committee is to present a proposed budget for the entire province to the People's Council to vote on. The final provincial proposed budget is a final product that combines information from the proposed budgets of all reporting units. Given the People's Council's decision, the People's Committee decides to how much revenue, and in what way, to allocate across different direct sectoral governmental agencies. Each direct government agency then decides how to allocate resources within their own reporting units.

The term "direct" is important to understand how revenue is allocated vertically. Preschools (before first grade), primary schools (grades 1 to 5) and lower secondary schools (grades 6 to 9) usually report directly to district Bureaus of Education (BOE) within district level People's Committees, which report directly to Departments of Education (DOE) of their respective provinces. In practice, it is provinces that allocate financial resources to district People's Committees which in turn (and, in principle, in consultation with district bureaus of education) decide on how to allocate these resources to schools within their districts. Whereas upper secondary schools (grades 10 to 12) report to and are directly administered by provincial DOE and thus receive resources directly from the provinces, not through district People's Committee's BOE.

Provinces themselves may affect equity in various ways through budgeting and regulatory policies. First, they may use transfer norms differentiated by economically based regions. Second, provinces may apply different school fee structures across socioeconomically designated regions. (Currently, only primary students are exempt from school tuitions.) For each school level (kindergarten, lower secondary, and upper secondary) provinces can set fee levels for students at public schools within their own jurisdiction within designated regional norms.

Similar to what discussed earlier, there is some variation in tuition imposed by two provinces of Nghe An and Kien Giang. In academic year 2018-2019, for example, monthly tuition for a secondary student in an urban district in Kien Giang, at VND 80,000, equals only two thirds of that in Nghe. Beyond this, nationwide, provinces typically maintain a small reserve to award top-performing students. As for regulatory levers, province- and district-level formal regulations and actual practices regarding the formal and informal fees, shadow education, and budgetary support for various kinds of education reforms can be decisive in shaping the costs, accessibility, and quality of education across localities.

It bears emphasis, however, that formal autonomy in education finance rests mostly with provinces and that provincial DOEs themselves have little autonomy in education finance. Although education departments at provincial and district levels are accountable for the quality of education, they have little say in their budget making process and the allocation of fiscal resources for both current and capital expenditures or in the hiring/firing of teachers. Provincial and District Departments and Bureaus of Finance as well as Planning and

Investment oversee education budgets and capital investment, while Province and District Departments and Bureaus of Home Affairs maintain control over hiring.

Thus DOEs and BOEs have limited control over two key elements of education: budgetary finance and teachers. Further, rigid pay scales do not distinguish between high- and low-performing teachers, giving teachers little incentive to work harder.

The lack of formal decision-making power is even lower for schools; a situation that contradicts the letter of the law. While the 2005 Education Law stipulates that public schools have a right 1) “to hire teachers and participate in a teacher placing process” and 2) “to mobilize, use, and monitor resources according to the law” (Article 58). However, interviewees in Nghe An and Kien Giang provinces indicated that schools have very little autonomy in practice, both in hiring teachers or in raising additional revenue to meet their needs and must abide by tuition fees set by provinces. They were able to raise ‘voluntary’ parental contributions through various “societalization” schemes (xã hội hóa giáo dục). However, rampant abuse and lack of transparency in this revenue source led to the enactment of Circular 16/2018/TT-BGDDT. One of the major regulations of this circular is that parental contributions must be completely voluntary with no required minimum amount. Interviewees at surveyed districts, for example, the Tan Ky Finance Division Head, lamented that this regulation has severely harmed schools’ ability to tap into parental contributions and more importantly, and adversely affected poorer schools, where voluntary contributions, while opaque, could sometimes mitigate limited budgets. The issue of how much autonomy DOETs, BOETs and public schools should be given remains a key source of controversy. Furthermore, sole focus on the features of formal norms should not distract us from the reality that institutionalized informal practices remain a key feature of Vietnam’s education system’s operation, as is explored below.

Teacher career trajectories/profession and teacher management

Vietnam's teaching corps have been praised for their professionalism, reflected in high levels of attendance and dedication. Schools in Vietnam are steeped in a culture of accountability and most (though not all) school principals are members of the communist party. These features of accountability have contradictory effects. On the one hand they incentivize normative conformity in ways that are supportive of certain kinds of learning, e.g. by rote. In the context of curricular reforms, they can be a liability, particularly when political conservatism among school principals or more senior teachers short circuit efforts to escape outdated curricula and teaching methods.

This research also examines how teacher policies are shaped by political settlements and public governance and if they are placed at the heart of the aim for quality education. In fact, the adoption of professional standards for teachers and school leaders has come together with the heightened promotion of accountability and standardization in the education system. Teachers’ standards, first introduced in 2007, are part of the state efforts to assure quality of the teaching force and hold teachers accountable for learning performance. The updated set of profession standards for teachers, released in 2018, included requirements higher than the

previous standards, leading to many teachers becoming underqualified and seeking to be upgraded (MOET, 2018b; VNIES, 2021). Despite the good intention of standardization policies, many teachers found the process of meeting the teacher standards to be highly bureaucratic and time consuming given their already heavy teaching and administrative loads (e.g., Nguyen, 2021).

In the context of “Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform,” teachers have been placed at the forefront to improve the education quality oriented toward competency development instead of content-based teaching and learning. Teachers across the country have attended in intensive cascade professional training for competency teaching. They are also expected to have autonomy and demonstrate competencies such as creative thinking and problem solving, core learning outcomes they need to develop in students. Paradoxically, they are too demanded to demonstrate patriotism and a love for socialism, and strictly comply with the Communist Party of Vietnam’s line in addition to the state's policies and laws. Although this mandate has been removed from the latest regulation on Teachers’ Standard (MOET, 2018b), it remains present as one of the key learning outcomes for future teachers in all teacher education programs.

Testing and exams

That Vietnam excels on international testing and exams is no accident as these have historically been a major focus on the education system and of education in Vietnam dating back to the classical period (i.e., pre-colonial period). Under the rule of the CPV, the culture of performance and achievement that developed over the course of the last several decades has appeared to variously support and undermine efforts to promote and sustain broad based gains in learning. On the one hand, testing policies and exams were long associated with a kind of a culture of “physical production targets” in which all provinces, districts, schools, and classrooms were incentivized to produce outstanding results – to an extent whereby the meaning of results was dubious. In this market context this culture has remained (in the context of a decentralized system governed by a highly elaborate system of formal reporting). Assessments are not in a meaningful way tied to education finance, even within provinces. But they are used as a means of evaluating the performance of schools and teachers on an annual basis.

These are high-stakes exams because the results are used to apply for universities; the second is the lower-secondary education graduation/high school entrance exam to high school (DOET and PPC in charge). At present, the most important national exams are those from upper secondary education [which the ministry of education designs and provincial Departments of Education and provincial people’s committees (PPC) administer]. Exams at the end of lower-secondary education are also crucial and have been frequently marred by cheating and corruption including, in recent years in a limited number of provinces, involving the children of top-ranking provincial elites.

The country’s testing and achievement cultures have also been commoditized through the development of a shadow education system (called “extra study, extra teaching”) that has

been well documented in the literature on education in Vietnam, but which is resistant to direct empirical measurement owing to its non-opaque features, as well as corrupt payments for access to “prep questions” and opportunities to re-sit (Hoang 2017). At lower levels of education, Vietnam’s education policy makers sought to move away from arrangements organized around annual assessment toward modes of continuous assessment.

The establishment of the new curriculum is regarded as the landmark of the current “Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform” which began with the adoption of CPV’s Resolution 29 (2013). In its strictest sense, it is the first complete stand-alone curriculum framework for Vietnam’s general education, often referred to as the New Curriculum. One of the noteworthy developments related to the New Curriculum is the approval for the use of multiple sets of textbooks. Vietnam’s primary and secondary education had adopted a single state-sanctioned set of textbooks since the 1980s. MOET’s Education Publishing House has been the only authorized entity that organizes the compilation, publication and distribution of official textbooks. The obligatory use of an official set of textbooks nationwide and textbook publication monopoly have been sources of critique and debates for many years (Nguyen, 2014; Hoang Tuy, 2019). The biggest concern over the textbook publication monopoly is that it puts a cap on the acknowledgment of diversity, particularly with regard to historical, political and ideological viewpoints (Salomon & Vu, 2007; Pham, 2017).

After many setbacks, the “one curriculum, multiple sets of textbooks” proposal was approved in mid-2019. With the New Curriculum in implementation in 2020, it is the first time in Vietnam’s contemporary education when the Provincial People’s Committees, in conjunction with local schools, are allowed to decide the sets of textbooks that are relevant to their provinces. In the ethos of societalization, non-state sectors can also design, publish and circulate textbooks. Still, the textbooks need to be vetted and evaluated by the National Council for Textbook Appraisal, under the control of the MOET.

While policy planners seem to show strong commitment to revamping the education system, policy-making processes and deployment of reform unfold many limitations. The development of the competency-based curriculum underwent several rounds of drafting with inputs from the general public and educational experts. Although public consultation for the draft curriculum is seen as a new plus point in Vietnam’s centralized system, people doubted if inputs from public polls were taken seriously and included in the revision of the curriculum. The implementation of the New Curriculum was also delayed for two years for better preparation of textbook writing and teacher training. Yet its launch in the school year of 2020-2021 confronted severe public criticisms regarding the content of grade one’s Vietnamese textbooks. The dispute raised legitimate concerns over limited time devoted to developing the curriculum and textbooks as well as the quality of teacher training despite substantial financial resources (My Dung, 2017; Nghiem, 2019). More broadly, the criticisms of the textbook not only indicate increased societal engagement in education but also reveal decreased public trust in education reform, which has generated limited satisfactory results commensurate with policy rhetoric and political determination.

7. SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT

The social and institutional environment in which education systems are embedded and on which they depend is not contextual or even foundational but is rather fundamental to education systems and, hence, the analysis of their coherence for learning. Contemporary Vietnam is a case in point. In Vietnam, the CPV's political commitment to education, reflected in its consistent and robust material support, particular aspects of the Party's approach to the promotion of learning, and features of its Party-structured system of public governance have demonstrably shaped the education system and its performance on learning. And yet, many features of Vietnam's education system and its performance depend on a final set of factors that we subsume under the heading of **societal engagement** and which comprise a range of relationships, processes, and institutionalized practices that define how citizens engage with their education system and the politics of education and learning.

As indicated at the outset of this study, our interest in the theme of societal engagement in the Vietnam context stems from our observation of crucial aspects of Vietnam's education system that may not be sufficiently understood through the analysis of formal policies. These include (1) a range of institutional arrangements, activities, and norms governing the payment for and provision of educational services within, outside, and on the fuzzy borders of the formal education system and (2) the public politics of education and, in particular, the presence of an educational public sphere in which one can observe something resembling a relatively autonomous and strikingly vibrant area of public opinion, debate, and political speech. As we will observe, while these features might violate commonly held assumptions about features of an education system in a socialist-oriented and, in many respects illiberal, party-state, they are in reality vitally important elements that are intrinsic to the functioning of Vietnam's education system and its performance on learning.

Once again, our interest in these variables draws on our reading of the Vietnam case in light of the RISE conceptual framework as well as scholarly and policy literature on accountability in democratic and non-democratic polities. With respect to the accountability of the education system to citizen-users, we observe that CPV's promotion of the "societalization" of the education system has achieved the desired effect of channeling resources into education and the education system, but has a deeply ambiguous relation to learning, while variously appearing to support and undermining the CPV's stated goal of quality education for all. As to the CPV's political accountability to citizens, we observe elements of Vietnam's educational public sphere to bring significant but uneven and ultimately insufficient accountability pressures to bear.

Societalization: promise, perils, and discontents

Part of Vietnam's societal buy-in is quite literal. In the late 1980s, Vietnam experienced an acute fiscal crisis that effectively required the abandonment of central planning in favor of a market-based economy. The education system was hit hard, with many localities experiencing

30 and even 40 percent declines in enrollment over a two-year period, delays in staff pay lasting months, the works. To prevent the collapse of the public education system, Vietnam's government and people resorted to a system of formal and informal co-payments to finance education; an arrangement that persists until this day.

Thus, the spirit of "all for education" that the CPV sought to impart through mobilizational politics in the 1980s did not cease in the somewhat chaotic circumstances of the country's transition to a more-market based economy. On the contrary, Vietnam's growing economy promises returns to education and the expectation of expanded economic opportunity and has thus incentivized household investments in education. As indicated earlier, public spending in education exceeds 4 percent of a rapidly expanding GDP, outpacing other countries in the region and in Vietnam's same income group (World Bank Indicators, 2018).

The genesis of societalization

In the late 1980s Vietnam ranked among the poorest countries in the world in per capita income terms and yet was led politically by a revolutionary Party intent on realizing universal access to essential services, from housing and health care to education. That Vietnam lacked the material means to achieve these aspirations was manifestly obvious. And yet, undeterred, the Party persisted in its quest, following a social mobilization model perfected in wartime and fueled, in the absence of resources, by revolutionary zeal. The outcomes of these efforts were impressive, given the circumstances. Despite its low income, Vietnam appeared to perform better in terms of the promotion of literacy and basic education than all other countries in its income group and even countries with many times its income, from Asia to Latin America. Nor should the quality of services be exaggerated. In conditions of extreme poverty, many parts of the country, especially remote rural areas, could muster education services provision at the most basic level. In the north in the 1950s and in the south in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the education sector workforce frequently served on a voluntary basis, drawing paltry subsistence support from the communities in which they lived and worked.

Unfolding in the aftermath of war amid conditions of economic scarcity and in the context of international isolation, the rapid unravelling of Vietnam's state-socialist economic institutions over the course of the 1980s placed these universalist ambitions out of reach, eviscerating the already threadbare fiscal foundations of the state and visiting sharp shocks on the country's education system, effectively punctuating its evolution, and setting the stage for the rapid transformation of principles and institutions governing the provision and payment for education services with effects very much in evidence today. By the early 1990s, economic growth in Vietnam began to accelerate and over the last three decades Vietnam has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world. While Vietnam's state fiscal position improved, particularly owing to increased revenues from trade, its limited ability to finance public services occasioned a search for institutional fixes that could put the education of the country's tens of millions of children on a more solid financial footing.

Copayments in practice

According to official formulations, societalization can best be understood as a set of policies and formal rules aiming to promote the provision and payment for essential services.

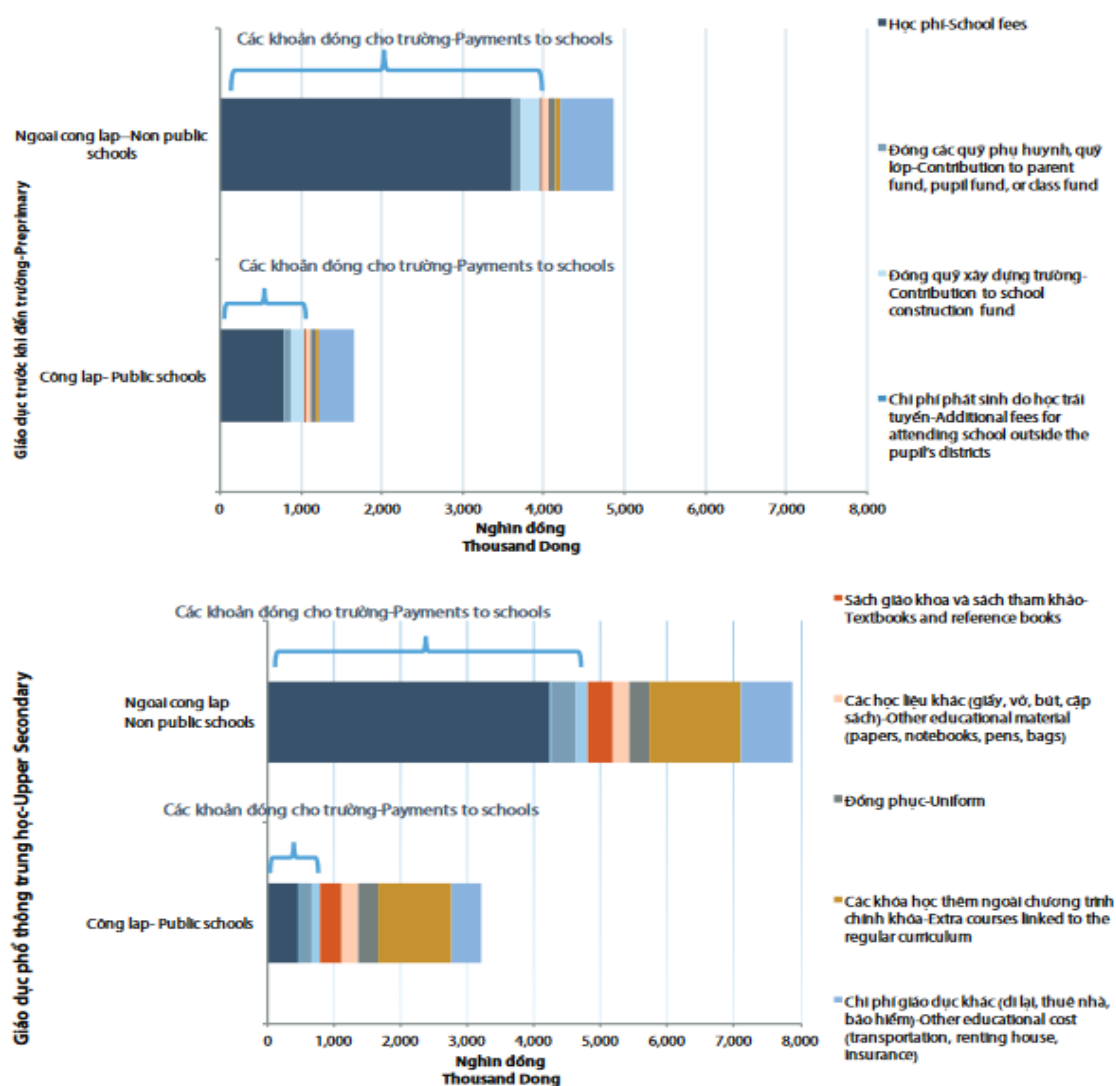
Societalization policies thus have sought to maximize the flow of societal resources into services, ease burdens on public finance, enhance participation in the creation and allocation of services by diversifying modalities of service provision and payment, and improve the overall quantity, quality and accessibility of services. This understanding accurately conveys societalization policies' aims and indicates some of its presumptive benefits.

Yet, such an understanding is either incomplete or slipping away from the original ideas of societalization as its associated informal practices take place on the daily basis of schooling life. The clearest example of these informal elements is the extensive system of co-payments that have evolved around the finance and delivery of education, many of which are informal or illegal or both. Co-payments, originally introduced as a system of shared responsibility or collaboration between the state and "the people," aims to improve the coverage (and quality) of education as it permits local authorities to expand education in ways that would have been impossible with sole reliance on the state budget. Household spending on education is therefore substantial, accounting for around a quarter of total spending on education, even at the primary school level, which in principle is fully public (UNESCO, 2016). In addition, household expenditure on education has increased over the years.

Total household expenditure on education is not only for tuition fees, but also for many other items. In addition to formal fees for textbooks and uniforms, there are a sundry of formal 'contributions' under such categories as construction and maintenance, insurance fees and, in many cases, school lunches (HIDE/IRS, 2012; Ta & Duong, 2015; Duong, 2015). Figure 6.1 shows that although the cost of school fees is more than 4 times higher in non-public schools, parents at pre-primary level spend mostly on various fees or the running costs of the school. At the higher levels, parents spend more on school fees and fees on extra study (UNESCO, 2016).

Figure 6.1: Household average expenditure per student, 2012

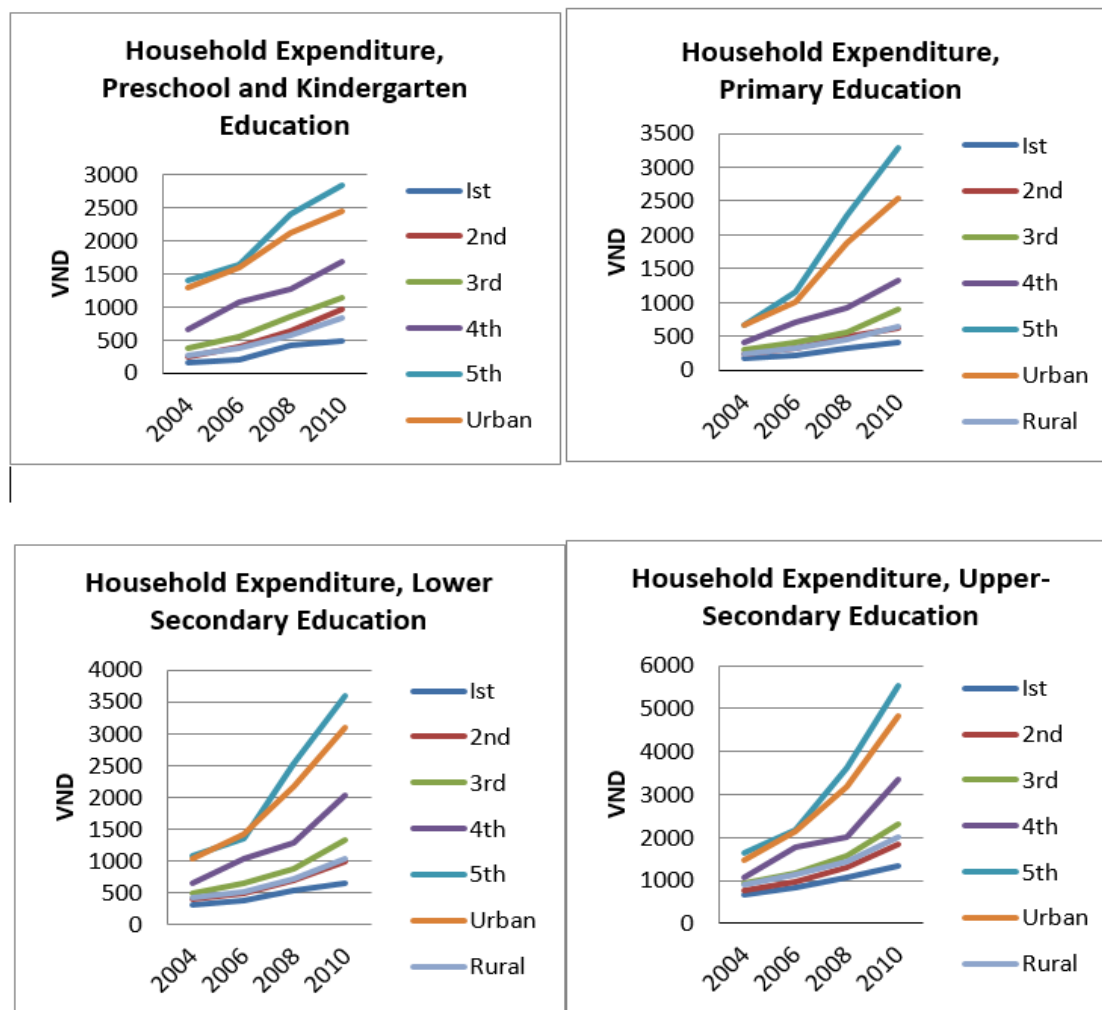
Figure 20: Household average expenditure per student, preprimary and upper secondary, 2012



Source: Technical team calculations based on VLHSS 2008, 2010, 2012

Source: UNESCO, 2016

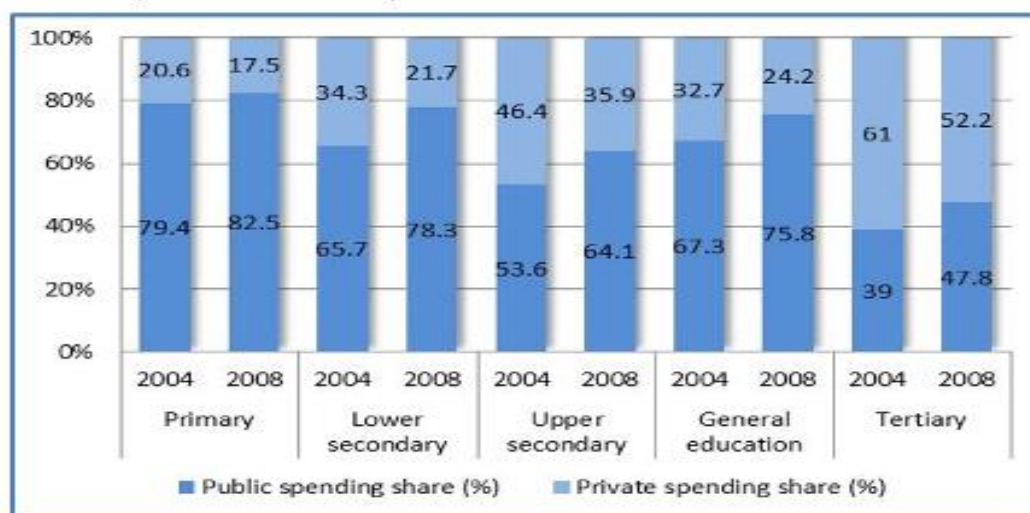
Figure 6.2: Household expenditures on education, 2004-2010, by different levels



Source: VHLSS 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010

Figure 6.3: Education Expenditure Vietnam, 2004-2008

Education Expenditure Viet Nam, 2004-08



VHLSS 2004, 2008; Ministry of Education and Training, cited in Vu Hoang Linh 2010

Box 1: Household Informal Disbursements for Education (HIDE) Study

Conducted in 2011, the HIDE Study examined informal payments in Viet Nam's primary and lower-secondary schools found basic education comes with many costs. Based on analysis of data from 40 districts, 164 communes/villages, 1080 households, 240 schools (130 primary and 110 lower secondary) and 480 teachers. The study was the first of its kind in Viet Nam. Researchers investigated 15 broad categories of education charges covering school and out-of-school expenses: tuitions and admission fees, contribution for school construction and maintenance, for school recurrent expenditure, for school equipment, for school and class funds, charges for textbooks and school supplies, for student uniforms, for school lunches, for transport and bike parking, for extra-classes and private tutoring, pre-payment for insurance schemes, membership in parent association and gifts and cash envelope to teachers.

- Households report contributing VND 7 million per year per child during the academic year 2010-11 which represented 14.5 percent of the total household income, a figure substantially higher (about three times) than that reported in VHLSS 2010;
- The value of parental contributions recorded in school records is only 1/20 of the value reported by parents, while the majority of schools fees and extra charges collected by schools are perceived by parents as mandatory taxes/charges;
- Very few parental payments are formal and transparent and most school fees and extra charges collected by schools are informal and subject to potential corruption; Payments made by families are not exclusively for the public benefit of the school or a class and some payments are attached to the individual benefit of the child;
- Insufficient official salary allocated to teachers drives extra teaching, while extra-classes are also encouraged by principals who benefit from rents generated for themselves and the school;
- Principals focus more on school inputs (and needs) rather than the quality of teaching and learning outcomes, while increased payments do not translate into increased involvement of communities in the management of school affairs;
- 40 percent of parents interviewed perceive an increase in corruption in basic education system over the past 5 years and 90 percent consider ‘‘societalization’ policy’ and parental payments to have fueled corruption practices; and
- Notably, 64 percent of parents do not perceive as a problem the fact that teachers and principals receive envelope payments and material gifts.

The informal co-payments have evolved into institutionalized features of the education system. Their evolution is inextricably linked to societalization policies, even as such policies themselves may make little or no mention of such payments. The blurred distinction in policies between formal and informal payments is problematic because both service users and providers in practice frequently do not know or make clear which fees/contributions are formal or compulsory and which ones are informal or voluntary. Yet, national policy makers often blame that the shifts in understanding of societalization are due to “off-track enactment” which further consolidates wrong interpretations of societalization policies. A former minister of education said “the idea of societalization originated from the 1960s when Ho Chi Minh called for the connection between school, family and society for better learning has been misinterpreted by many as ‘privatization’ in education only.”

The significance of societalization policies in education and learning outcomes can be seen in several main respects. First, societalization policies and practices have acted as formal and informal institutional mechanisms for channeling financial flows into the provision and payment for education services. Second, societalization policies and practices have contributed to the diversification of modes of service delivery, seen first in the expansion of an extensive ‘shadow’ education system of extra study and extra teaching and, over the last decade, an acceleration in the development of non-public education. Third, alongside certain positive effects, societalization has facilitated the commodification and commercialization of education. Fourth, governance in education is generally rated as poor by parents, as is reflected in the results of PAPI, HIDE and other studies, which indicate excessive and non-transparent payments are a common and undesirable feature of Viet Nam’s education system. At lower levels of education, parent’s committees do not play a meaningful monitoring function while the governance of universities is largely opaque.

According to the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2018, parents spend between 2.8 millions VND to 10.4 millions per year on a child’s education. With an average annual income of 46.4 millions, such expenditure on education accounts for one-fourth of a person’s annual income (GSO, 2019). More than one-third (35%) of household expenditure on education is for extra-study at the upper secondary level (UNESCO, 2016). This data might not report the real numbers which also vary significantly across the regions. While societalization seeks to mobilize resources and talents from ‘all society,’ burdens for the payment of services are assigned increasingly to households and in this sense contribute to income-based inequalities of access to services and access to higher quality services in particular. Figure 6, below, illustrates the relationship between net-enrollment rates and income across income groups.

Like many other Asian countries, extra-study is an entrenched feature of Vietnam's education system (e.g., Bray & Lykins, 2012; Kennedy & Lee, 2018; McAleavy et al. 2018). Yet the development of extra study in Vietnam in its current form is directly linked to the evolution of societalization. In the early 1990s, two key drivers of extra study gained force: (i) increased demand for education among households with sufficient income and (ii) increased supply of extra study by teachers looking to improve their incomes. Though not an explicit goal of societalization, the subsequent growth of extra study is linked to societalization in the sense that it has intensified, in financial terms' households' responsibilities for education payments. Moreover, though extra study is not formally encouraged, it is widely recognized by Vietnamese state officials that incomes from extra study are often an important source of income for teachers (and schools), as expressed by many official participants, for example: *"Teacher salaries are low, even with professional supplements, they do not enough to support teachers' living, so teachers have provide extra classes, otherwise, it's really hard* (DP2-1-SN12)

Extra study also appears indispensable in the final years of lower- and upper-secondary levels with significant household expenditures on extra classes geared toward exam preparation. Extra study is most widespread in the largest cities and urban areas, but is also common in towns and densely settled rural areas across the country. One study that reviewed 2006 survey data from 9,189 households found that 32.0% of primary students were receiving tutoring, while in lower and upper secondary students, respective proportions were 46.0% and 63.0% (Dang 2013). A recent study reports that Vietnam is an extreme outlier, as compared with OECD countries in terms of tutoring hours, with "six hours of tutoring per week [which] is three times higher than the expected number of tutoring hours on the trend line" (Dang & Glewwe, 2018, p. 1188). Analyses of VHLSS data indicate spending on education increased in real terms between 2004 and 2010 across all levels and that out-of-pocket payments are higher as students move into the lower and upper secondary levels. By all accounts, and despite measures to curtail its growth, the scale and scope of extra-study courses at all levels has increased in recent years.

Although the relationship between attending private tutoring and academic performance is inconclusive across various contexts including Vietnam (Le and Baulch, 2012; Bray, 2014), the immediate effects of private tutoring are apparent. For example, students attending extra classes often feel more dependent on private tutoring while many others feel exhausted and stressed, and may end up neglecting mainstream schooling (Pham, 2015). In addition, there are cases when teachers 'blackmail' or treat their own students (un)favorably to attract more students into teacher-run extra classes. Teachers were also reported to require students to study extra to master knowledge required for what Vietnamese parents refer to as 'trick' assignments that test knowledge taught only in extra study, assessments of which are included in overall evaluations of students' learning (Tran & Harpham, 2005; Hoai Nam, 2016). On the social level, private tutoring is widening the equity gap because students of high-income families can afford fee-based extra study, and thus have better chances for social mobility than their peers from low-income families.

It is claimed that societalization policies have salutary effects on social solidarity as it involves ‘all of society’ in the provision and payment for services as well as the management and monitoring of services. This is an appealing and even seductive claim, in that it presents societalization as community-strengthening, beneficent, and even patriotic activity. In our interviews with education officials and provincial authorities, several participants characterized the “study encouragement movement” (*phong trào khuyến học*) as a key example of an aspect of societalization that promotes learning performance and spirit.

The study encouragement movement began in the early-1990s, with the activities of local actors aiming to promote learning in both formal and informal education. The pattern frequently involved small-scale organizations (e.g., local patrilineal associations). Major concerns of many (grassroots) associations have centered around how to get donations or financial contributions from local families, businesses, and organizations to promote learning of local students and community members. For example, “*we do a lot of ‘finance encouragement’ (khuyến tài) in order to encourage the learning (khuyến học) of many students from low-income families. Families all want their children to study well, so they are often ready to donate money, joining hands with local businesses to build a learning community*” (D2-1 SN10). Anecdotal evidence suggests the scale and scope of these voluntary associations varies considerably across regions.

At the same time, aspects of the “movement” have taken on increasing (though not altogether) bureaucratic traits. In 1996 Vietnam’s state formally established the Vietnam Association for Promoting Education (VAPE) on a nationwide basis, as a state supported association with the mission of “Promoting study [and] promoting financial contributions to build a learning society.” At the local level, from the province on down to the district and commune, VAPE units operate, typically with modest budgets and volunteer staff. The scale and scope of their activities varies across localities. In some localities, the association appears mainly concerned with providing support to “talented and gifted students,” whereas in others they engage in activities especially focused on assisting children from selected localities and households financially or through various means of educational support. In sum, the VAPE represents an important aspect of Vietnam’s education system, even as the significance of its contributions to the promotion of learning has yet to be subject to rigorous study.

On the other hand, concerns about the corrosive effects of societalization on equity and community have been expressed since its earliest stages. Evidence suggests that, with respect to social solidarity and participation, effects of societalization are mixed. While some societalization policies have promoted ‘participation,’ primarily from resource capable individuals or organizations rather than public expertise in education (Dang T.K.P., 2020), others have contributed to inequality, perceptions of inequity and mistrust, and real marginalization of vulnerable groups. Indeed, accountability and transparency in the education system are sorely lacking. Parental informal payments made in the process of accessing or receiving better quality education have become a norm at primary and lower

secondary education levels and tend to increase the cost of access to education services and reinforce opportunities gaps. In the meantime, schools (public and non-public alike) are developing a more entrepreneurial approach to their operations, bringing both benefits and risks. The informal aspects of societalization in the education sector remain a source of concern. Many children unable to pay for extra classes or make “voluntary” contributions can be subject to pressures from their teachers while children can suffer demeaning or distancing behavior from their peers (Tran Huu Quang, 2006). By raising barriers to access, societalization has contributed to the emergence of an increasingly stratified education system whereby better-off households pay and benefit from higher quality education services and better-off schools reinforce their bargaining power vis-a-vis private payments (London, 2011).

Client power or system failure ?

‘Societalization’ is practical and popular among policy-makers and service providers alike, as it promises resources and opportunities to profit from state commercialization with few ‘strings attached’. For many service providers, there is therefore a strong material interest in maintaining the status quo. However, many of the limitations of societalization policies stem from weak accountability. Owing to weak accountability, societalization has often contributed to corruption and rent-seeking, with the result that Viet Nam has developed an increasingly chaotic and stratified system of services provision that links access to quality services to income rather than need.

While societalization has channeled resources into the education system, it has also facilitated the development of practices that can be detrimental to learning among children from low income households. There is also the charge that policies have fueled the formation of entrenched interest groups whose commercializing actions – whether simply aimed at securing a living or for generating large profits – promote principles antithetical to quality education for all. It has been suggested that a redeeming quality of education in Vietnam is that, however reliant on informal payments, in the education field you get what you pay for. This implies that the education system is accountable to those citizens or clients able and willing to pay and is contrasted favorably with settings in which informal payments do not yield benefits.

It is arguable that societalization policies and practices, rather than leveling the playing field, have exacerbated educational inequalities by making access to education at all levels highly contingent on out-of-pocket payments. Evidence indicates that beneficiaries of various fees exemptions or transfers are not exempted from a host of formal and informal ‘contributions,’ effectively nullifying the effects of ‘pro-poor’ policies, while a host of other costs, such as extra study, impose significant burdens on the poor (Tran Huu Quang, 2008).

Origins and limits of an educational public sphere

There is an additional pattern of societal engagement with education of interest to us, as it appears to at times add another layer of political accountability that we wish to explore. This concerns the development in Vietnam of what we might call, for the lack of a better term, an education sector public sphere. In Vietnam, a highly literate society with a large party-controlled “revolutionary press” and a teeming social media scene, matters pertaining to the education sector are widely discussed across a variety of social media platforms (see Elstad 2009, Nguyen-Prochan 2021). Given the self-styled revolutionary socialist character of the CPV and Vietnam’s households’ significant financial outlays, it is not surprising that education finance and related issues (such as scandals and quality for money) have featured as a prominent subject of debate for almost three decades.

Notably, Vietnam’s party controlled press regularly addresses this controversy. It is also among the most prominent subjects of debate on Vietnamese social media (Bui 2016). We will explore the relation between conventional and new media and the education system, with particular attention to questions about accountability. Drawing on scholarship in this field, we will consider how discourses of accountability crop up in Vietnam’s media and online political discourse, while also referencing survey and interview research undertaken in the RISE Vietnam CRT and other projects, such as The Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index.¹³

Pressing accountability: The emergence and limits of an education-sector public sphere

Vietnam’s press and mass media and its vibrant new media platforms have figured significantly in the evolution of the country’s education system and are essential to an analysis of the system’s social embedding, evolution, and performance over time. It is our conjecture that, historically and up to the present, features of the production and consumption of mass media, specialized media, and new media¹⁴ in Vietnam have – at times – had the practical effect of enhancing (i.e., strengthening) the coherence of Vietnam’s education system for learning. That is, Vietnam’s press and mass media and the broader public’s participation in new media have sometimes enhanced accountability both *within* the education system and regarding the system’s relations to stakeholders in its broader social environment. In what follows, we seek to illustrate the bases and limits of this conjecture, even as we

¹³ “PAPI is a flagship governance program initiated by the United Nations Development Programs in Vietnam since 2009. PAPI measures and benchmarks citizens’ experiences and perception on the performance and quality of policy implementation and services delivery of all 63 provincial governments in Vietnam to advocate for effective and responsive governance.” source: <http://papi.org.vn/eng>

¹⁴ By mass media we refer to conventional print and electronic media including, especially newspapers, television, and radio. By specialized media we mean education-focused publications. Whereas new media refers to media included but not limited to the above categories that are produced for and disseminated over various online platforms.

concede that measurement of these effects would require a study beyond the scope of the present project.

Specifically, we contend that Vietnam's longstanding veneration of learning and tradition of social criticism, the CPV's 20th century achievements with respect to the promotion of literacy and education, and the increasing prosperity and ease of communication that Vietnam has experienced in the first decades of the 21st century have facilitated a felicitous ratcheting up of public awareness of problems in the education system that permitted locally-based citizens to grasp local and extra-local aspects of the system's functioning and of the significance of accountability therein. Viewed from within the system, the presence of voices for accountability from the press and society (via new media) have, in combination with the party-state's formal and informal compliance mechanisms and pressures stemming from "societal buy-in," increased the perceived need within the system to maintain adherence to formal norms, probity, and preparedness for "answerability" (*trách nhiệm giải trình*).

As with the evolution of Vietnam's education system, the evolution of journalism and mass media and its bearing on the education system reflects distinctive phases of the country's social history. The early development of journalism and mass media occurred in the colonial period (beginning in 1858) and (especially) in the context of Vietnam's early 20th century anticolonial movements (Peycam 2012). During this period print media and (increasingly) radio was used as a means of promoting political ideas and broadcasting both propaganda and educational material. In 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence. Yet independence under the leadership of the CPV would not be achieved until 1975, after national partition and three decades of war had ravaged and traumatized the country (London 2011).

Journalistic accounts of social life are artifacts. And, as such, journalistic accounts of the education system promise insights into the evolution of Vietnam's education system and features of its social embedding. Journalistic and mass-media reports on social life are produced and consumed in specific social and organizational contexts. And they involve the selection, translation, arrangement, interpretation, and dissemination of information, even as the consumption and interpretation of journalistic accounts by consumers may not be wholly controlled (H. Becker 2007). A historical appreciation of these aspects is essential for understanding how journalism and media have shaped education policy.

From the early 20th century through to 1975, the role of the mass media in Vietnam's education system expressed varying and often competing orientations of dominant groups. In the early decades of the 20th century, the rank instrumentalism of a colonial regime that systematically limited the availability and scope of education was countered by increasingly vigorous if fractious patriotic groups who used a mix of conventional and clandestinely produced print media to demand greater access to education. Between 1954 and 1975, national partition and the presence of two competing political regimes in the north and south of the country meant the development of two correspondingly distinctive "media regimes." In the north and in various "liberated zones" of the south, the CPV oversaw the development of a

highly disciplined brand “revolutionary journalism” that meant to advance the Party’s goals and interests in the education field and beyond. By comparison, the practice of journalism in the south (under the Republic of Vietnam, or RVN) reflected a diverse and unruly collection of outlets. In both northern and southern Vietnam, tensions and contradictions in wartime reporting on education centered on questions of authority and patriotism and limits on free expression. During this period, the ideas and practices that guided the development of education systems reflected geopolitical fissures. By 1954 the CPV had publicly embraced its previously unspoken but obvious alliance with the Soviet Union and China, sending thousands of staff overseas for education in the Eastern Bloc. While in the south, the RVN and USAID facilitated the large-scale importation, translation, and dissemination of educational materials from the US. In the north, education as presented in the mass media was to be put to the purpose of the development of “new socialist man,” a theme that would survive well beyond wartime. In the north, intellectuals and journalists sometimes bristled in the face of comprehensive party-state controls on content but were ultimately quelled and made instruments of state power (London *ibid.*)

Our concern in this analysis is the postwar period and, in particular, the period since 1985, when the confluence of developments within Vietnam and the arena of world politics instigated an at-first tentative but soon rapid movement toward large scale social transformation, including movement toward a more market-based economy. An appreciation of the role of the press in Vietnam’s education system during this period history provides a window onto the efforts of various social groups and actors within Vietnam’s state-controlled media world to report on the country’s education system, the social conditions and events that have shaped this reporting, and the ways in which this has shaped the education system’s ideational, relational, and institutional features.

While the CPV emergent confident of its ability to rule, the country and its education system faced enormous challenges. In the first decade of the postwar period, Vietnam was among Asia’s poorest countries. And although the CPV promised and endeavored to provide basic education for all children, its ability to do so was limited by conditions of material scarcity. At mainline Party newspapers and in various publications in the education sector, emphasis was on the numerical and geographical expansion of the education system and various patriotic themes.

Within this context in hand we are well positioned to consider three crucial aspects of mass media and media reportage with respect to Vietnam’s education system. These include: (1) Expansion in the scale and accessibility of media of all kinds and its role in shaping the regular functioning of and popular and expert understandings of the education system; (2) the gradual emergence of the media as a whistle blower in the context of the evolution of the party state-promoted, partly-informal and opaque system co-payment schemes that evolved as intended and unintended effects of *societalization* (as discussed in Section 7, above); and (3) the massive expansion of internet technologies and its implications for points 1 and 2 above. As will be argued below, Vietnam’s historical achievements in the fields of literacy and education combined with these developments has permitted an increasingly well-developed

media-space in the field of education, contributing to the professional development of the education sector workforce, and encouraging an engaged citizenry, within limits.

In wartime and the immediate postwar years, Vietnam's poverty and features of its political system under the CPV had restricted the availability and content of mass media focused on education. In the postwar context, the largescale geographic and organizational expansion of the education system presented new challenges and the CPV utilized its media apparatus to advance various education sector goals. While the government took a gradual approach to integrating the northern and southern education systems, the national education system was increasingly vast. In the context of anticolonial war and revolution, the media often functioned mainly as an instrument of propagandistic messaging. With its extensive and multi-level bureaucratic infrastructures, its hundreds of thousands of staff, and millions of students, the education system now emerged as a major sector of social activity and was duly accorded increasing attention in the state-controlled press and various (state generated) specialty publications. By the late 1980s, Vietnam under the CPV had developed a national-scaled and fully integrated mass media apparatus guided from the pinnacle of the CPV's apparatus in Hanoi and, more specifically, the Party Committee on Propaganda.

This was perhaps most strikingly seen in the way in which the media served as conduit for an amplifier of popular concerns about matters concerning education finance. At first these concerns went largely unspoken. By the mid-1980s, hyperinflation, food shortages, and increasingly limited budgets compromised the basic functioning of the education system, as was seen in the need for most teaching staff to pursue work outside of the education system, whether through work in the agricultural sector or in the informal sector, as was captured in the documentarian Trần Văn Thủy's evocative video footage of an acclaimed math teacher's work as vegetable hawker (Trần V.T. 1987) surreptitiously captured on account of the aid teacher's expressed shame. When, in the early to mid-1990s, Vietnam's state introduced a system of formal and informal co-payments in education, the press provided a rare outlet for the expression of concern regarding education matters and state-run newsheets such as *Lao Động* (Labor) and *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth) featured regular coverage of the plight of the education system (London 2011, ch. 1). For its part, the satirical/humor magazine *Tuổi Trẻ Cười* regularly addressed education system themes, often through cartoons depicting the pervasiveness of informal cash payments.

By the mid-1990s, Vietnam began to emerge from its postwar poverty and the state became capable of investing greater public resources in education. Conditions for the growth of Vietnam's mass media and the sophistication of publications focused on the education sector improved. By and large, these processes of expansion and (to a lesser extent) sophistication have continued. Overall, the state produces some 659 newspapers and journals. This includes 137 locally-focused publications. The education system is a regular focus of newspapers with national readerships, whether in print or digital form. But the education system has its own large-scale media world. By 2020, Vietnam listed some 52 state-managed education-specific scholarly education journals, and a number of state-managed internet platforms geared to education specialists (SRV 2020). Notably, by 2019, only two of a sample of 13 journals

drawn from 387 accredited academic journals met standards of the ASEAN Citation Index, while zero met the minimum criteria of Scopus (Tran T. 2019).

As Vietnam's economy entered a period of rapid growth, the CPV also increasingly saw mass media and television in particular as a means to promote education and learning. For example, in 1996, Vietnam's national television station VTV collaborated with MOET to form a six-pronged made-for-TV curriculum aimed at preschool children; preschool and primary school teachers; adult English language students; secondary school pupils preparing for exams; management and accounting, and general viewers (Marr 1998). In more recent times, Vietnam's increasing prosperity has been accompanied by the explosive growth of internet technologies, greatly expanding and transforming the media landscape.

Over the last two decades Vietnam has had one of the fastest rates of internet uptake in the world. During this period, access to print media, electronic print media, television, and radio have all greatly expanded, while the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook have permitted the wide and instantaneous dissemination of journalistic accounts of Vietnam's education system. Furthermore, in contrast to predictions that single-party states would seek to carefully limit internet access, Vietnam's state quickly embraced new media as a means of engaging the public and shaping popular attitudes and behaviors. With respect to education, the education system, and learning, Vietnam today exhibits an extremely lively mass media. Overall, new media, traditional and digitized media outlets have contributed to the rise of something resembling a public sphere in which expanding channels of communication have had the paradoxical effect of expanding coverage of the education system – thereby calling attention to its various achievements and challenges. Social media has been especially instrumental in exposing and facilitating attention to education sector corruption scandals, including recent high-profile cases that resulted in length prison sentences.

The point is not that mass media is an effective mechanism, but rather that its presence is felt; it is noisy, capable of brining shame on impropriety, and commands attention. There are, however, very real limits to the scope of press freedom in Vietnam. Furthermore, the formation of something resembling public opinion (to paraphrase Habermas's terminology for the emergence of a public sphere) occurs within a social environment in which rights and protections for whistleblowing members of the press and public are weak and poorly defined and easily trodden over by those with access to means of state power. There is no shortage of energy in Vietnam's mass media or its interest in matters concerning education and learning. An interesting question concerns how and under what conditions various stakeholders might help print, electronic, and various forms of new media act as durable fulcrums of accountability.

As we have observed, Vietnam's education system is well organized and effective in many respects and messy and ineffective in others, even as public and private spending on education is on the rise. Evidence suggests spending per se will not buy improvements in education systems performance. The challenge is *both* to "spend the money and to use it well." As Anh (et al 2021) have implored, creating greater transparency with respect to the allocation of public funds can have the productive effect of sparking public debate and scholarly and policy

research, and also lend support to efforts to align societal and local practices with key policy goals.

The question of where the impetus for such enhanced accountability would originate from is of paramount importance, but here too we find promise. Several potential sources can be identified, across various domains of principal agent relations. In the field of elite politics, recent years have seen increased attention to the promotion of learning geared to the present and future needs of labor markets while also endeavoring to promote greater educational opportunities for all children. Whether this remains at the level of rhetoric (as it often has in the past) or can finally be translated into specific initiatives remains in doubt, particularly in the context of decentralization. In the field of public administration, it is often argued that central governments can use a combination of information and fiscal levers to incentivize local actors to deliver centrally determined policy goals, while avoiding the risk of rigid top-down policy prescriptions (RISE 2005). In the past, this seemed beyond the capacity of Vietnam's state. More recently, however, Vietnam's capacities in the field of education management and information systems (EMIS) have increased considerably. Whether, how, and to what extent central authorities are willing and able to leverage this information to shape management practices at the grassroots is a key concern at present and is the subject of a background paper currently being drafted for the Vietnam CRT. At the local level, local authorities and EMIS professionals within the education system face their own challenges. As one EMIS staff in Hai Phong related:

We are extremely reticent to publicize information [even though the information system we have is quite modern], because we are following old norms wherein every province wants to conceal [unflattering] information... and all provinces are still entangled in this practice.

In the meantime, pressures for accountability from the bottom up appear set to remain sporadic and confined to specific communities. While there is no shortage of energy at the grassroots, individual citizens and communities face significant risks in bringing public pressure to bear on schools. In this context, the news media and social media remain key outlets for bringing pressure to bear, though they too have limitations, often centering their energies on scandals and whistleblowing, rather than any system-wide initiatives aimed at promoting accountability locally or nationally. Overall, we observe in Vietnam great interest in promoting accountability in the education system – within and outside the party and state bureaucracy. As we have argued, this quality of Vietnam's education system and its embeddedness may distinguish the country from most others in its income group. Be that as it may, the country's decentralized features continue to militate against systemwide measures.

Looking back and ahead

Factors bearing on learning outcomes highlighted in this analysis include: (1) Features of Vietnam's political settlement and the role of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in the evolution of the intents and purposes of Vietnam's education system; (2) the nature of public governance within the CPV's state apparatus and its bearing on accountability relationships

within the education system and between the education system and the rest of the state; (3) the existence of a complex system of copayments that has taken form in Vietnam's education system over the last three decades and its bearing on relations between the education system and households and children; and, (4) the emergence of a dynamic education-focused public sphere in Vietnam whereby citizens are able to express views and articulate concerns across a variety of conventional and new media platforms. We now move on to conclude this essay.

8. THE ORIGINS AND DURABILITY OF SYSTEMIC COHERENCE FOR LEARNING: TOWARD A THEORY OF EMBEDDED ACCOUNTABILITIES

In this paper we have sought to establish what features of Vietnam's politics and the public governance its education system have shaped the education system's performance. We have identified the CPV's political commitment to education – visible both at the level of elite politics *and* in the routine processes and compliance procedures of its sprawling party state – to have prioritized education over the course of several decades across all levels of public administration. Additionally, we have found specific patterns of societal engagement – visible in public and private investments in education and in a surprisingly active education-specific public sphere to have given the education system considerable attention to the daily affairs of the country. Taken together, we conjecture that these features have produced institutionalized levels of accountability to education policy goals that exceed what is seen in other countries.

We have also found that, however impressive, aspects of Vietnam's education system are at times ineffectual or even counterproductive with respect to announced education sector goals, including the promotion of quality education for all. Further, while the CPV's education policies implicitly endorse the goal of expanding learning for all and even speak of a “learning society” (*xã hội học tập*), the functioning of the education system sometimes undermines these goals. While decentralization can confer certain advantages, the way decentralization has evolved in Vietnam has lacked coherence and contributed to a sense and a reality of policy fragmentation. There remains in Vietnam a weak link between the delegation of policy goals on the one hand and the finance, information, support, and motivation needed to achieve them. In the meantime, “societal buy in” in the Vietnam context, despite having certain benefits, has also contributed to the commodification and commercialization of education which, combined contributes to inequalities of access to quality education.

Perhaps most importantly, we have located sources of Vietnam's education system's strengths and weaknesses in the ways it has evolved as an embedded feature of Vietnam's social environment. Exploring the politics of policy adoption and the public governance of the education system historically and sociologically has permitted us factors beyond more proximate determinants of a system's effectiveness. Such a conclusion might be seen as dispiriting for several reasons. First, because it suggests that the elements of Vietnam's success are specific to Vietnam, i.e., they are the product of a irreplicable and unique “goldilocks conditions.” And, second, because an education system's embedding in an unwieldy “black box” variable that is not amenable to the identification of mechanisms that work to promote or prevent a system's effectiveness. Finally, a historical sociological analysis of the sort developed here may be deemed methodologically loose, with scant rigorous testing of hypotheses. This brings us to the fundamental point of our analysis.

Education systems are complicated, messy, and indeterminately evolving clusters of relations, processes, and institutions that exist in specific geographical and historical settings. They are the product of human agency and politics and power relations, as it is people, acting

individually and collectively, who create and shape education systems' purposes as well as their effectiveness with respect to the achievement of those purposes. Recent research on education systems and their politics and public governance (especially Pritchett 2015) has established that the coherence of an education system with respect to the promotion of learning depends on the co-presence of robust, multi-directional accountabilities across the key relationships and policy design elements that make up an education system. Given the level of complexity in these relations and their decentralized nature, education systems are difficult and at times seemingly impossible to comprehend.

How Vietnam does it

Vietnam's education system reflects the presence of robust accountabilities absent in many other settings. This we have sought to show lays, in part, in features of Vietnam's politics and the politics of the education system in particular. These include the CPV's communist corporatist political settlement, the party's political commitment and bureaucratic discipline, the party's long-term (if incomplete) recognition of the importance of expanding learning for all as a vitally important objective, and the Party's commitment – in principle and often in practice – to the laudable goal of quality education for all.

Beyond these factors, we find that the public governance of Vietnam's education system are the product of a messier calculus of embedded accountabilities that can be understood only through a studied appreciation of an education system and its constituent actors in dynamic relation to their social environment.

We have sought to identify sources of accountability and unaccountability that shape Vietnam's education system's performance around learning nationally and subnationally. As we have demonstrated, there are many respects in which the embedded accountabilities that Vietnam reflects have failed to promote the objective of expanding learning for all. These include, among others: a political commitment to education that at times emphasizes normative conformity rather than learning and a political and administrative system whose specific decentralized features frequently undermine national policy objectives around learning and quality education for all. As we have emphasized, the problem is not inadequate centralization or decentralization. Rather, it is the need for policies and practices in which delegated tasks (i.e., the fulfillment of policy objectives) are accompanied by appropriate combinations of finance, information, support, and motivation.

From our standpoint as scholars of contemporary Vietnam's education system with an interest in the success of efforts to enhance education systems' performance around learning in Vietnam and elsewhere, we have invited readers within and outside Vietnam to take a different view of the country's comparatively superior performance. Specifically, we have suggested the need to avoid making understandable but incompletely helpful assumptions about Confucianism or communism or economic growth or good policy and we have cautioned against being distracted by indicators of the country's comparatively strong performance. Instead, we suggest a need to ask what has worked well and less well in

Vietnam with respect to education and learning and why? And what, if anything, can an analysis of Vietnam contribute to efforts to improve education systems' coherence for learning in other settings?

Education systems analysis: Contributions to a theory of embedded accountabilities

Based on explorations of Vietnam's experience and with an eye to sparking a dialogue with analysts of education systems in other settings we suggest three principles are particularly important for theorizing (i.e., understanding and explaining) education systems' coherence or coherence for learning across a range of settings. These include a greater investment in understanding education system's evolution in relation to their dynamic social environments, a broadened understanding of politics, and openness to multi-disciplinary modes of analysis and communication in the interest of improving education systems performance around learning.

Context is not the 'foundation,' but education systems' dynamic social environment

As we have shown, a historical sociological exploration of a country's education can reveal the specific ways education systems are embedded in their social environments. With respect to factors contributing to the promotion of learning, our research has identified several key points. These include evidence of high levels of sustained political commitment toward education matched by robust public spending on education that has been strongly redistributive across provinces; evidence of the consistent promotion of accountability and professionalism within the education bureaucracy and schools, including continuous efforts to align policies and practices with the Party's political priorities; and evidence of distinctive patterns of societal engagement including: High levels of societal involvement in education, including significant private; out-of-pocket financial contributions to education, and; consistent popular demands for greater education system accountability with respect to the quality and relevance of education.

All elements of accountability that Vietnam's education system reflects to the world, and all of the accountability gaps that weaken its performance with respect to the expansion of learning, are products of human agency and politics. In some instances, this agency can be seen clearly, as in the decisions and policies that political elites take and make, or the efforts of specific local actors (e.g., in provincial administrations, in schools, and in classrooms and communities). In other instances, accountabilities and accountability gaps are the product (sometimes unintended) of collectivities of social relations of domination, conflict, competition, cooperation, contestation, and accommodation that resist easy identification. In Vietnam we see both kinds of accountabilities. The first in features of the CPV and its political commitments. And the second, in features of the education system as it is embedded in the dynamic relations, processes, and institutions of its broader social environment. The embedded accountabilities we see in patterns of societal engagement in Vietnam may not be amenable to modeling. But they do suggest how a society engaged with its education system through monitoring, public discussion and debate can contribute to a "learning society."

The analysis of politics entails attention to power relations on a variety of scales

Ultimately, our attention to education systems' embeddedness stems from our interest in understanding which features of education systems' politics, power relations, and formal *and* informal institutional patterns promote learning, which do not, when, and why. Our premise is that approaches that treat "society" as the backdrop or foundation of an education system are promising, but perhaps do not go far enough. We take the political analysis of education systems' embeddedness further still through a contextual analysis of how power relations, institutions, ideas, and actions continuously shape the education system's performance.

The performance of Vietnam's education system was by no means fated. In its efforts to further promote learning, the country has many things in its favor, including an enduring political and societal commitment born of historical experiences specific to it and an expanding and globalizing economy that presents good opportunities and incentives. These factors, combined with Vietnam's citizenry's active involvement in education – through various active forms of cooperation and contestation – appears to generate elements of performance pressure in the system. At the very least this is a question for future research. Be that as it may, among middle- and lower-income countries, and indeed among all countries, Vietnam is a country that reflects the sort of "all for learning" spirit that is all too often lacking.

Transdisciplinarity and a theory of communicative action

The concept of accountability lies at the core of much of the recent research on education systems' performance around learning. Our analysis of the politics of learning in Vietnam suggests still greater and more detailed attention is needed to the ways and/or conditions under which accountability to the promotion of learning obtains or fails to obtain across key dimensions of principal-agent relations that structure an education system. A transdisciplinary perspective is essential.

Education systems everywhere are formidably complex that evolve, succeed, and fail in dynamic, interdependent relation with the social environments within which they are embedded. Around the world, countries and localities within them vary enormously, both with respect to their relational and institutional features and in terms of the capabilities and interests of the actors that shape social change within them. There is no simple or even complex single-discipline only method sufficient to understand and explain the performance of an education system. While the present authors cannot deliver a fully transdisciplinary analysis, our experience in the fields of sociology, political economy, and education, and our exposure (as outsiders) to the fields of economics and public administration leave us excited about the promise of a transdisciplinary programme of education systems research.

Intelligibility matters. We believe that however complex, it is imperative the analysis of principal-agent relations that shape education systems' performance be intelligible to normal

people, i.e., presented in a way that is comprehensible to a diversity of education system stakeholders. To this end, our analysis of education systems in Vietnam seeks to simplify (but not dumb down) and foreground the principal-agent relations that define an education system while also exploring ways to develop and present a sustained and deep attention to education systems' *embeddedness*, i.e., features of education systems' interdependent relation to features of their specific and dynamic social environments.

Final thoughts

Accepting that each country's experience is unique, we use Vietnam's experience to contribute to the critique and further development of the emerging body of theoretical and policy literature on determinants of education systems' performance with respect to learning. We do not assume all or even most aspects of Vietnam's experiences will be relevant to all or even most countries. We do believe, however, that its analysis identifies ideas, questions, and research agendas that will carry relevance across diverse settings. All countries are unique and there is no reason we should expect Vietnam's experiences to resonate with education system stakeholders globally. Be that as it may, we observe that features of accountability relations around education and learning in the Vietnam context touch on issues of global significance.

While it is widely agreed that education systems may not be understood independently of their political, societal, and institutional context, we assume that analysis of education systems' embeddedness is fundamental rather than merely "foundational" to how education systems work. To this end, we adopt a more explicitly historical sociological political economy analysis that aims to grasp how accountability relations and their embeddedness have evolved, both nationally and in local contexts. Our research indicates that unique aspects of Vietnam's politics, public governance, and features of societal engagement do help to account for the country's performance, but that other aspects of these same variables have limited the education system's effectiveness. This leads to the hopeful conclusion that, with additional efforts at enhancing accountability within the education system, improved system performance around learning are within reach. Companion papers on education finance and education management and information systems explore aspects of this issue in greater detail.

In exploring features of Vietnam's political commitment to education, features of the education system's public governance, and patterns of societal engagement, we do not assume that these factors have been universally supportive of learning. Indeed, our principal aim as scholars of education in Vietnam is to understand why the country appears to have performed so well on so many aspects of education and learning but apparently decidedly less well on others. Indeed, many of the aspects of Vietnam's education system we address in this paper are found to have elements that support the promotion of learning and others that curtail it. Furthermore, we suspect that subnationally, education systems are embedded differently and that this, too, represents an important area for further research. In the context of the current paper, our focus is zoomed out at the national level, with use of case studies drawn from different regions to tease out some of the nuances that shape variation in learning.

While these arrangements should not be romanticized (for example, they have at times created space for opaque and corrupt management practices), the fact that up to 40 percent of finance for *public* education is out of pocket has undoubtedly invited elevated levels of public engagement in the education system. Somewhat paradoxically, controversies and scandals regarding perceived corruption or the questionable value of extensive informal payments, have kept the citizenry engaged. Indeed, though ruled within a Leninist framework, Vietnam displays high levels of public engagement around education, reflected in the extensive coverage education receives in state-run media and in the more spirited debates that animate discussions of education policy across a range of social media platforms.

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

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