ISSUES IN EDUCATION FOR VIETNAMESE CHILDREN

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By: VinaCapital Foundation, Ho Chi Minh City
Contact: giao.vu@vinacapitalfoundation.org

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I. Initial Progress

For the children of Vietnam—about 30 million people under age 18—education is more accessible now than any given time in the past (UNICEF Vietnam 2010). Since 2001, the State budget for education has been on a steady rise, increasing from 3.2 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 6.8 percent of its GDP in 2010 (World Bank 2014).

Vietnam is on the right track towards promoting gender equality in education, given that in 2009, the ratio between females and males in primary education was 0.9, and the figures shifted to 0.95 and 1.01 at the secondary and tertiary levels respectively. In a similar vein, the literacy rates among Vietnamese men and women in the age group of 15-25 years were found to be equal nationwide and varied little across the country’s different regions (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011a).

The most important achievement regarding education, however, is the fact that Vietnam announced to have universalized primary school in 2000 (Vu 2012), way ahead of the 2015 deadline for realizing the United Nations’s second Millennium Development Goal.

Apart from these, Vietnam has a lot more to do in an effort to improve its educational system—unable to address many of the existing needs and struggling with a new set of disparities that result from the country’s rapid integration into the world economy.

II. Low Participation in Early Childhood Education

Preschool is an emerging challenge for Vietnam. During the 2005-2006 School Year, the enrollment rate among 3-5-year-olds was only 58 percent (UNICEF Vietnam 2010). An important reason for such low participation in early childhood education is the lack of kindergartens. In urban areas, where migrant parents live with their children when they are little (before sending the kids to the countryside when they get older and having them raised by the grandparents), the system of public preschools is in fact so overloaded that it does not have enough space even for children with permanent residency status, which—as a result—makes it impossible for children of migrant households to attend public kindergarten (Quoc 2013). In Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, only 29.4 percent of nursery-age children are “lucky” enough to be enrolled in public preschools (T Nguyen 2014). Worse is the situation in rural areas, where three particular provinces in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam—including An Giang, Soc Trang and Kien Giang—have a seriously low rate of preschool enrollment, at 9 percent, 6.4 percent and 4.8 percent respectively (Vietnam faces shortage of 27,500 preschool teachers’ 2013).

Another reason for a great number of Vietnamese parents not to involve their children in formal early childhood education is the lack of funding. Given a choice, most adults would understand the value of early childhood education. There have been numerous empirical studies from developed and developing countries alike (e.g. International Labour

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1While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—of which Vietnam is a State party—defines a child as anyone under 18 years of age, the Vietnamese government’s definition of children are those aged under 16.

2The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training defines “universal primary education” as “Mobilizing students who complete primary education at 95 percent for urban communes and towns, and 80 percent for communes with difficult social economic situation.”
Organization 2012; UNICEF 2013; Lien Foundation 2012), which confirm that the brain architecture of children is critically set during the first five years of life, and that quality preschool will not only boost a child's preparedness for primary school, but also make a lasting impact on her/his educational attainment and career success. An oft-cited research by James Heckman (2011)—a Nobel Memorial Prize winner in economics—goes beyond the moral value of early childhood education and proves that sending children to preschool is one of the smartest ways a nation can do to improve its workforce productivity and economic efficiency. In numerical terms, every dollar invested in quality preschool generates 7-10 cents per year, Heckman wrote. Few Vietnamese parents would deny the benefit of preschool; however, when faced with economic hardship, a mother or father would rather wait until education becomes compulsory, that is, Grade 1, to send the children to school. The gap between the rich and the poor—as shown through the percentage of children attending kindergarten in 2006 and according to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam—was as large as that, 80 percent of children from the richest quintile of households were in preschool, while the rate among children from the poorest quintile was only 36 percent (UNICEF Vietnam 2010). Such a disparity is unfortunate, especially when the existing studies on early childhood education—without exception—conclude that disadvantaged children need and benefit the most from preschool.

Vietnam’s national strategy for educational development covering the 2011-2020 period aims to make preschool universal for 5-year-olds by the end of 2015; whereas, it is still in dire need of more infrastructural and human resources—an estimate of at least 27,500 preschool teachers and 363 kindergartens (Hong 2013). Without any clear plan to mobilize resources at the local level, Vietnam is likely to miss this 2015 deadline and millions of Vietnamese will grow up without any educational experience of preschool.

III. Issues Remain in the Universalized Primary Education

Primary school, as mentioned earlier, is the best accomplishment in Vietnam’s educational system, but entails a range of issues in terms of quality. A core weakness of the system is that Vietnam allocates inadequate instructional time for each primary class, at less than 700 hours/year (obviously behind most Asian countries, such as Indonesia [1,260 hours/year]; Thailand [740 hours/year]; South Korea [802 hours/year] and Australia [884 hours/year]). While a study by the World Bank in 2009 pointed out that longer instructional time is positively correlated with higher scores in Mathematics and Vietnamese, about 45 percent of students in Vietnam are still enrolled in half-day schooling (UNICEF Vietnam 2010). This is only one of the many reasons why primary education is accessible to almost all children in Vietnam yet the primary completion rate reflects a less promising reality, e.g. in 2009 it was 88.2 percent (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011a).

Also worth mentioning is the cost of primary education. Primary students have to pay “informal” fees, such as school safety and infrastructure maintenance, which are set differently by individual schools throughout Vietnam. Such fees, together with the costs of uniforms, textbooks and school supplies, mean a real financial burden to poor Vietnamese families, although the country’s Constitution states that there is no tuition fee charged at the primary level. In fact, a Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey revealed that in 2006, the Vietnamese already spent significant amounts on primary education: On average, every household from the poorest quintile spent USD 13/year, while the richest quintile’s expenditure was five times more—at USD 64/year (UNICEF Vietnam 2010).
IV. Schooling and the Children Left behind

Based on the available literature published between 2006 and early 2014, this paper identifies three groups of children who are most disadvantaged within the educational system of Vietnam, including the poor, the disabled and ethnic minorities.

A. Children living in poverty

Using VND 653,000/person/month (or USD 1.05/person/day) as the national poverty line, Vietnam now has a poverty rate of 20.7 percent ('Vietnam narrows poverty, yet leaves remainders poor: World Bank’ 2013), which does not reflect the impoverishment among children since their age-specific needs go beyond monetary measures. Child poverty is actually more prevalent in Vietnam than most would expect. If basic needs like education, health, shelter, social inclusion and protection are taken into account, one in every three Vietnamese children under 16 years of age—or about seven million children—can be considered poor (Vietnamese Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs and UNICEF 2008).

That poverty and low education are mutually reinforcing has long been a well-known logic, which in the case of Vietnam is evidenced by the fact that the North-West region has both the highest rate of child poverty (up to 78 percent) and the lowest net enrollment rates at all levels of education. Moreover, the impact of poverty becomes more pronounced towards higher school levels, given that after primary education, students must pay tuition fees. This to a certain extent explains the significant gap in net enrollment rates between the richest and poorest quintiles of households, which in 2008 were 23.3 percentage points at the lower-secondary level (Grades 6-9) and 47.2 percentage points at the upper-secondary level (Grades 10-12) (Vu 2012).

Besides the formal education realm, private tutoring (i.e. after-school classes organized by students’ parents, teachers, schools or supplementary education centers) is such a phenomenon that most Vietnamese parents equate it with higher academic performance. Since mid-2012, private tutoring for primary students has been banned by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, but the practice has never lost its popularity at the secondary level. In a country where the annual income per capita is only USD 1,960 (Nguyen 2013), lower-secondary students have to pay at least an equivalent of USD 0.4/week to attend tutoring classes for one school subject, and the corresponding figure for upper-secondary students is USD 0.73 (Dang 2013). According to the “more private tutoring, better academic performance” norm, higher-quality education is biased against poor children when their parents choose to get them professional help with only one or two school subjects, or cannot afford to enroll them in after-school classes at all. The disparity in 2008, for instance, was that the best-off quintile of households spent one-third of their education expenditure on private tutoring at the secondary education level, whereas the poorest quintile spent roughly 12 percent on the same item (Vu 2012).

B. Children with disabilities

When it comes to education, Vietnamese children with disabilities are the most disadvantaged among any populations ever categorized or documented. It is estimated that
there are one million children with disabilities throughout Vietnam. Although statistics are inconsistent across individual public and private institutions, the figure of children with disabilities attending school vary between 24 percent and 52 percent. Equally daunting is the fact that as few as 34 percent of Vietnamese with disabilities (children and adults alike) are literate, which presents a picture totally different from Vietnam’s high literacy rate—up to 91.1 percent of the total population (Rosenthal 2009).

Vietnamese law, though improving, is inconsistent regarding its attitude towards people with disabilities. The 2005 Education Law authorizes the establishment of a two-tiered educational system where the “disabled and handicapped” are to study in separate classes and schools. This goes against the inclusivity spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Vietnam signed in 2007 but has yet to ratify (Rosenthal 2009). More important is that it is in conflict with Vietnam’s own Law on Disability, which was approved and passed by the National Assembly in 2010. Unlike the education law, the disability law stresses that putting handicapped children in a separate classroom is only allowed when no inclusive-education options are available or at the request of their parents.

In practice, the country has slowly incorporated people with disabilities into mainstream schools, especially since 1990, when Vietnam ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and started to recognize handicapped children as subjects of rights. Currently, there are three approaches to educating children with disabilities in Vietnam, including Special Schools, Integrated Schools and Inclusive Schools. Special Schools accept only children with disabilities and educate them in a separate, if not “isolated,” environment. While this model is the most dominant and has been faced with criticism from certain international development agencies, there remains a great demand for more special schools for the large population of handicapped children who have never received formal education. Integrated Schools are reserved mainly for children with disabilities and include a small number of students without disabilities, where the former will be brought to an inclusive setting and adapt to study together with those different from them. The last model, Inclusive Schools, refers to regular schools where each classroom takes in no more than two children with disabilities and adopts a teaching method, as well as curriculum, that is supportive of children with and without disabilities (UNICEF Vietnam 2010).

Despite the mentioned enterprise to diversify the educational system and make it more inclusive, there is a serious shortage of teachers specialized in education for handicapped people. In the context of Vietnam having about one million children with disabilities, a handful of 1,500 Vietnamese have been trained in formal full-time or in-service tertiary education to teach such special students. In the near future, the country's capacity to educate children with disabilities is unlikely improve in any significant terms, given that “there are only seven educational establishments nationwide having faculties for special education” (Rosenthal 2009, p. 39).

In complementing Vietnam’s effort to boost its capacity to serve students with disabilities, numerous players outside the public sector, such as the Hanoi University of Pedagogy and various international nonprofits, have worked on special education projects and initiated

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2The highest prevalence rates of child disability (children aged 5-15) are found in the following provinces: Da Nang, Nghe An, Quang Nam, Kon Tum, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Lao Cai, Tuyen Quang, Ha Tinh, Dien Bien and Quang Tri (United Nations Population Fund 2011).
inclusive education programs. Helpful as they are, almost all of these projects are funded by private revenues and reach a limited number of children (UNICEF Vietnam 2010). Amidst the emerging discourse in Vietnam over whether the government and private donors should continue to fund Special Schools or focus their resources solely on Inclusive Schools, the number of children with disabilities who have no schooling is still large and to them, the expansion of any educational model would be much needed.

Another technical problem that hinders Vietnam from providing more and better access to education for children with disabilities is the lack of reliable data, let alone any holistic national data set disaggregated by disability type. Even the country's most important legislation which governs all disability-related matters, that is, the 2010 Disability Law, simplistically categorizes disabilities into only five types and vaguely groups everything else as "others." Research on disability, more often than not, is carried out "in small doses" and in certain geographic areas to quickly serve an individual organization's project. This poor availability of information undermines the capability of educators and policy makers to perform any planning that strategically and widely benefits the handicapped population.

On the psychological side, Vietnamese society—ancient and isolated for some critical decades before starting to connect with the world economy in the 1990s—seems unready to create an environment free from prejudice against people with disabilities. The 2010 Disability Law prohibits all forms of discrimination against people with disabilities. The reality, unfortunately, remains that there are low family and social expectations about the potential of children with disabilities. Superstitious beliefs, e.g. one being punished to have a handicapped child because of their wrongful act in the past, loom so large that many try to hide their children and never send them to school (Rosenthal 2009; UNICEF Vietnam 2010). In some extreme cases, a parent may be so depressed upon learning her/his child’s disability that s/he would commit suicide, become a drug addict or divorce her/his spouse.

Together with the above technical and societal challenges, more immediate limitations such as inaccessible buildings, lack of adapted curricula, improper educational materials and shortage of assistive devices continue to put education beyond the reach of thousands of Vietnamese children with disabilities.

C. Ethnic minority children

Vietnam can legitimately take pride in its achievement of the first United Nations Millennium Development Goal, i.e. eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. Still, the socioeconomic development from which millions of Vietnamese have benefited seems unable to trickle down to the country's ethnic minorities, who account for less than 15 percent of Vietnam's population of 90 million (‘Vietnam narrows poverty, yet leaves remainders poor: World Bank’ 2013). Living in remote and/or mountainous areas, they bear the isolation that deprives them of both the opportunity and skill to participate in the new market economy. Children from ethnic minority families, accordingly, face a high poverty risk of 62-78 percent, while the corresponding rate for the majority Kinh children is 24-28 percent (TL Nguyen 2014).

A student's education certainly depends on his or her individual agency, but born with an ethnic minority background, one is vulnerable to poor education and dropping out of school, just like the general situation of 53 ethnic minority groups throughout the country. As
reported by the World Bank (2009), almost one in every three ethnic minority households has a child who quits school in the middle of a grade, whereas the same thing happens to 16 percent of the majority Kinh families. In explaining such a high dropout rate among ethnic minorities, most Vietnamese policy-makers would claim that minority families do not value education, which a report dedicated to social analysis by the World Bank (2009) found to be an “abused reason.” This report and a study by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, UNICEF and UNESCO (2008), while using different research methods, both concluded that the top causes of ethnic minorities quitting school include financial barriers, the need to work (child labor), the poor quality of teaching in schools, and long distance to school coupled with inadequate classroom infrastructure.

Speaking of educational attainment, 34.4 percent of ethnic minority children never make it to Grade 6, compared to 16.3 percent of Kinh children who do not receive secondary education (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011b). For the few “fortunate” ethnic minority students who attend secondary school, they may not have the confidence to take the university entrance exam thinking that even if they pass, they would not have the money needed to leave their village or pay for tertiary education.

A dilemma keeping ethnic minority children in the poverty circle is that few competent teachers and education managers want to work in remote areas, where ethnic minorities tend to live. The problem then becomes that poverty, combined with lacking access to quality education, makes it doubly difficult for ethnic minority children to rise above impoverishment (Le and Nguyen 2004).

Teachers who actually venture out to the areas particularly populated by ethnic minorities, nonetheless, seldom possess the indigenous knowledge or cultural currency required to accommodate ethnic minority students. Most of the teachers in fact have their homes far from the students’ villages, preferring to live in a town/suburb and commuting to the campus every day, which poses a significant distance—both geographical and psychological—between them and the children they teach (Truong 2011). National literature has been able to conclude that stereotypes on the part of teachers and Kinh children about ethnicity make minority students think negatively of themselves, which will over time undermine their academic performance and interest in classroom activities (TL Nguyen 2014).

Language also challenges the potential of ethnic minority students to do well in school. Except for a handful of provinces that receive international support, nowhere in Vietnam can ethnic minority children use their mother tongue as a medium of learning. At certain schools where there is a large population of ethnic minorities, their native languages are taught, but only as a school subject. Unfortunately in impoverished provinces, such as Kon Tum in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, there is no resource to add minority languages to any school’s curricula. Although the children can speak their mother tongues when communicating with their parents and neighbors, the only way for them to learn the written form of their native languages, especially the oft-overlooked ones like Bahnar and Gie Trieng, is going to Church, reading the translated Bible or relying on a few educated elders in their villages.

Currently, there are only three provinces in the entire Vietnam where there exists bilingual education. Since 2008, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, with the support of UNICEF, has been implementing Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education in Lao Cai (North-West of the country), Gia Lai (Central Highlands) and Tra Vinh (the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam) for a select number of preschool and primary-school students from the
Mong, Jarai and Khmer ethnic groups. The purpose of this program is creating an environment where children’s education will start with their mother tongues as the languages of instruction and Vietnamese only as a subject. From Grade 3-5, the students will make a transition to bilingual education, using both their mother tongues and Vietnamese as the languages of instruction, and by the end of Grade 5, be ready to join the mainstream Vietnamese-language system of secondary education (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training and UNICEF 2012).

The preliminary evaluation of this bilingual program has shown positive results and lends support to the claim that children score better when they study in their mother tongue. Still, it is a small-scale experiment amidst the mass of ethnic minorities who are not offered the choice to be educated in their native languages. In fact, long-standing traditional nonprofits are hesitant about bilingual education and instead encourage ethnic minority children to, after school, practice speaking Vietnamese at home and with their parents, so that they can quickly catch up with the mainstream culture.

While the above picture already confirms the obvious disadvantage of ethnic minorities, the plight of ethnic minority girls is even worse. The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training reported that up to 70 percent of the ethnic minority dropouts in 2009 were female (Nhát 2009). When, due to economic difficulties, an ethnic minority family has to decide which child to send to school and which child to keep at home, it is likely that the daughter will forsake education to take charge of the household chores. There are more subtle but just as significant factors that pose as a deterrent to girls’ education—particularly the minorities living in the Northern Midlands and Mountains and Central Highlands regions of Vietnam—including long lonely walking distances to school that require overnight stay and increase female vulnerability and lack of bathrooms at school for girls to clean themselves during menstruation (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, UNICEF & UNESCO 2008).

All in all, education for ethnic minority children, similar to the work needed to be done for students with disabilities, requires a long-term solution based on thorough and reliable information. Apart from a few alarming known facts, e.g. among all the ethnic groups of Vietnam, the Hmong has the lowest literacy rate (37.7 percent) and the Khmer has the lowest percentage of people aged 5 and above attending school (17.5 percent) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011a), there is a serious lack of holistic data about the minorities’ education disaggregated by ethnicity.

If there is no quality research or comprehensive remedy to the educational inequalities facing ethnic minorities, then schools—instead of being a springboard for upward mobility—might “reproduce existing structural inequalities among ethnic groups” (Truong 2011, p. 171). It is at school that the students "first and foremost acquire a sense of their social position and limits" (Truong 2011, p. 198) by being exposed to people who are different from them and learn the facts about their ethnic groups’ socio-economic conditions in comparison with those of others. The profound societal consequence, though not easily explained or seen, is that, upon both knowing and living the entrenched hardship of their ethnic group, the children would learn to restrain themselves from high aims and instead accept to be "inferior" or at most only equal to the average Kinh person.
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