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Comparing Rural and Urban Primary Education in the Mekong Delta

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SIT Study Abroad

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Comparing Rural and Urban Primary Education in the Mekong Delta
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Abstract

Over the course of one month I conducted a study of primary education in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. I compared rural and urban schools to determine what the differences were, how they are reflected in individual schools, and what effects these differences have on individual children. I visited and studied three schools in Can Tho City and three schools in rural communities outside of Can Tho. The differences expected were in enrollment, teacher qualifications, facilities, student motivation and ambition, and curriculum.

Data was compiled from classroom observations, interviews with principals and teachers, and surveys completed by students. Results indicate that there are far more similarities than originally suspected, particularly in material taught, teacher experience and education, gender balance and student attendance, and students' plans for the future. The disparities are evident, primarily in the facilities, time spent at school, and education for the whole child. Urban schools offer more academic opportunities and care for health and happiness as well as installation of facts. Recommendations include more time for students in school, redirection of resources, and attention paid to the education of all facets of children.

Introduction

Vietnam is globally characterized as a developing nation, one with a rapidly growing population, abundant natural resources, and a dramatic recent history. It has a Communist government that is shifting towards capitalism, creating a dynamic economic environment. It is still primarily an agrarian economy but the industrial sector is growing rapidly. The Vietnamese people are proud, ready, and willing to give themselves fully towards modernization. This includes becoming a contributing member of the global trade scene, improvement of living conditions for their diverse populations, and a focus on education.

The government has long stressed the importance of education and has exerted itself in providing education everyone. With 27.9% of the population under 14 years old, the future of Vietnam is incredibly depended on the already strained education system. The government recognizes these demands and has significantly increased funding for schools and teachers.

One area of concern is Southern Vietnam. In the years since the reunification of the North and the South in 1975, the South has struggled to adapt to the Northern education system. This is a residual effect of the French Colonial period, which contributed to the development of the Northern system, as well as the pattern of expansion into the Mekong Delta. The South is less established and the education system reflects this difference. There are also many ethnic minorities who are not reached by the same standards established by officials. Material is frequently only taught in Vietnamese and not the languages native to ethnic groups and the lessons are sometimes culturally

irrelevant. The Mekong Delta, a diverse region in the South of the country, thus presents an ideal setting in which to study education in Vietnam.

The system as it is set up now is not much different from many Western school systems. All curriculum, policies, and standards are generated at the national level. In theory every child is guaranteed a free education from the beginning of nursery school at age three or four, to the end of upper secondary school. There are many possible paths through the school system, especially including the many technical schools and colleges (see Appendix 1). Students begin with one year of kindergarten at age five, moving on to primary school in a separate building at age six, for grades one through five. Until recently students in fifth grade were required to take an exam to continue their education but that was eliminated due to cost and the conclusion that students were too young for such pressure (Thai 2005). There exists a national campaign for compulsory primary school attendance that is enforced.

Following primary school most students attend lower secondary school, which lasts for four years, from grade six to grade nine. Alternative paths may lead to vocational training or non-formal apprenticeship. At the end of ninth grade all students currently take an exam to determine placement into an upper secondary school, however this test is also being phased out and replaced with grades. Those who excel enter upper secondary school and attend for three years, until twelfth grade. At this time all students sit for an exam which determines eligibility for university or college. There are a limited number of universities in Vietnam, and placement at one of them is highly competitive. Far more students go to college, with less prestige and more focused, job-oriented

training. This structure is rigid and well-established and theoretically available to every child in Vietnam.

Worth mentioning is the effect that all of these national standards and tests have on the classroom. These factors, combined with the traditional Vietnamese focus on respect to elders, discipline, and collectivism, create a very teacher-centered classroom at all age levels. As Ngo Mi Le Anh discussed in her paper “Hindrances of Vietnamese Culture to Effective Learning,” these values create an educational environment full of formality. The textbook is always correct. The teacher is infallible. The student becomes a machine, acquiring as much information as time will allow. One of the most recent significant policy changes was the acceleration of curriculum. What students once learned in second grade they now learn in first, material traditionally covered in third grade is now covered in second, etc. This is putting a great deal of pressure on administrators and teachers. Different schools are handling the challenges in different ways.

It was these issues, as well as group excursions into rural areas, that led me to question the nature of education in villages versus that of cities. National test scores have established that there is a difference between the two, but I wanted to see first-hand how funding is affecting these schools and more specifically the students attending these schools. I wanted to know what these students liked about school, what their experience was like, and how it affected their outlook on the future. I wanted to understand their families, their communities, and the way the schools fit within them. I hoped that with this study I would cast light on to the youth of Vietnam, understanding problems facing its children, and what this developing nation had to look forward to. I suspected that

what I discovered would hint at larger issues Vietnam faces as it matures at breakneck speed, struggling to not let too many people fall behind.

I expected that rural schools would have less qualified and experienced teachers, far more boys than girls in attendance, insufficient materials and supplies, less student enthusiasm and participation in school, and lower student ambitions. Essentially, my aims in conducting a study into the differences between urban and rural education were to see how those differences are manifested and reflected by individual schools. Perhaps, given the appropriate context and understanding of many intricate components, I could begin to address the solution to this broad problem.

Methods

To obtain a representative sample of rural and urban schools in and around Can Tho City, I visited three of each. This fit best within my time constraints and demands for a translator. I selected the schools with the advice of my advisor and staff at the University. I tried to select my schools with a diverse range of circumstances.

One of the three schools that I visited in Can Tho City was Ngo Quyen, reputed to be one of the best public schools in the city. With around 1800 students and a brand new building, it is an impressive institution located downtown. I also went to Tran Quoc Toan, near the University. It has over 2000 students and a similar format to Ngo Quyen. The final school that I visited in the city was the Vietnamese American Primary School, a private institution in its first year with one class of eleven first graders. An outgrowth of the English Language School, I chose it to see what benefits unlimited funds can buy.

I went to three rural schools all fairly close to each other between 35 and 60 kilometers south of Can Tho City. The first was Hoa An 4, a small school with 333 students. The next was Tan Binh 1, a slightly larger school with 461 students. Finally, I visited Kinh Cung with 771 students.

For each of my visits I took with me a translator. Two were friends from Can Tho University, each in their fourth year, with very good English skills. They were accustomed to my accent and my speed of talking, which made them well-suited to the task. Twice I went with a recent University graduate, currently teaching in the Department of Education. He was an excellent translator and also provided me with some insight into the Education system. All three were very good at guiding me through

the schools and villages and maintaining a good level of professionalism with the people I was interviewing.

At each school I managed to do at least the three following things: interview a teacher or administrator (sometimes both), observe at least one class, and distribute surveys (see Appendix 2) to first grade students. The survey asked simple questions about age, gender, prior educational experience, favorite subject, a desired future job, and the occupations of the student's parents. The goal of this survey was to obtain an idea of the student's ambitions, background, and provide a subtle window into their family situation. Inadvertently, I used this to measure to evaluate student ability by how much assistance they required for its completion and how much of the ideas on the survey were their own.

For data analysis, I entered results into Microsoft Excel, and compiled worksheets for each school I visited. I created a coding system for entering data about student's ideal future profession and their parents' occupations. I classified each job according to how much formal education was necessary for the position. For example, teachers, doctors, and business people received a 3, because those positions require formal higher education. I classified government employees, bankers, office workers, and those listed just as "employees" with a 2, estimating that those required education past high school, but not a University or College degree. Finally, any artisan, farmer, laborer, factory worker, vendor or those unemployed received a 1. This coding scheme presents a very limited and reduced view of the information gathered, but allows for a broad interpretation of the differences between schools.

Most of the time I observed the same class which completed the surveys. I either saw a math lesson or a Vietnamese lesson in these sections. Sometimes schools allowed me to visit a number of grades and subject areas. Schools typically invited me to visit their language classes, if they had them, so I saw first grade, second grade, and third grade English classes, as well as a fifth grade French class. In these observations I sat in the back of the class and took notes with the help of my translator. I tried to be unobtrusive while observing, but occasionally this was difficult, particularly because I am a large foreigner who deserves a little student scrutiny and attention. However, overall, I did not sense that my presence ever significantly affected the lesson I observed or the performance of the teacher.

Preferably I would begin my visit with an interview with the principal, to get a sense of the organization and structure of the school, the enrollment size, and other basic facts. I inquired about the principal's background, any issues that the school was dealing with, and the staff in the school's employment. At several schools I gathered this information from teacher interviews instead.

At every school except Kinh Cung I interviewed a core teacher, a language teacher or both. I asked questions about the teacher's personal background, education, experience, class size and composition, responsibilities, attendance issues, communication with parents, learning goals for students, facilitation of social education, if they taught anywhere else, and occasionally government policies regarding primary education. The majority of these interviews were conducted via my translator. Others were in English and French. Some of the time I was able to be alone with the teacher to

ask questions, but much of the time there was an administrator, another teacher, or children with us.

1. The Vietnamese Primary School Classroom

Before comparing urban and rural schools it is necessary to have a good understanding of the way that the typical primary class operates. There are many similarities among all of the classes that I observed and patterns in the organization of all the schools. These generally reflect the cultural values and the national government's plans and policies. Vietnam's students and teachers fit well within its cultural boundaries and highlight some of its unique structure and character.

There are a number of physical aspects of the classroom that are consistent throughout the school system. Every room in every school has desks lined up facing the board. There are two students to each desk. A blackboard has the date written on it and above it hangs a photograph of Ho Chi Minh and a small Vietnamese flag. On the wall are five teachings of "Uncle" Ho which every student memorizes: 1. Love your country and its people; 2. Study hard; 3. Stand by your peers and countrymen; 4. Keep your classroom and country clean; 5. Be Honest, Brave and Humble. Just forward of the board is the teacher's desk on a raised platform, which the teacher stands on. There were a few variations in classroom decoration but most rooms are kept rather sparse.

The architecture of the schools, except the private Vietnamese American Primary School (VAPS), is the same everywhere. All have a courtyard with open air classrooms built around it. There are trees or bushes but most of the space is concrete. This area is used for the physical education classes. Students stay in the same classroom all day while extracurricular teachers travel to the classroom.

The schedule of the school day is the same at all schools as well. Class begins at 7:00am and all periods in the morning are thirty five minutes long. Around 9am the

students are given a twenty minute break during which they snack and play in the courtyard. The beginnings and ends of periods are signaled by a large drum. At 10:30am the morning session is complete with four periods. The afternoon begins again at 2pm, but the structure of the afternoon differs by school.

Courses material is the same everywhere in the country. The curriculum is set by the national government in Hanoi and all schools follow the schedule strictly. The textbooks are the same, the same small colorful plastic manipulatives are sold for math, the same letter and number cards are carried in the same blue sleeves, and the same chalkboards are erased with the same foam erasers. Every day students in primary school study math, Vietnamese (literature, history, culture, and geography), and science. On a weekly basis every student also studies art, music, and physical education.

Each lesson is taught in the same way. Classes with young children begin with a song or greeting. The teacher asks the children to review. This either involves a game, a few questions on the board, or oral quizzing. Following satisfactory completion of the review the teacher writes the name of the lesson on the board in extremely careful cursive handwriting. The students repeat the name of the lesson together and then several of them repeat it separately. If it is a math lesson there may be a few equations on the board or a few numbers written for students to discuss. The teacher will present an equation like " $5 + 1 = 6$ " and students will repeat this math fact over several times. In addition to the writing on the board the teacher presents a few visual examples with pictures or three dimensional objects to illustrate the concept. The pictures usually are larger versions of the ones in the students' textbooks.

As the lesson progresses the students repeat several more facts orally and write them on their boards as their teacher evaluates their progress. Often one student will go to the board to complete a problem that everyone else does at his or her desk. In unison the students all raise their boards to be judged by their teacher at the front. After this practice they return to oral recitation and a peer will verify or correct another student's answer. At this point in the lesson correct answers are rewarded with rounds of applause from classmates. To conclude the lesson teachers will often distribute a group assignment for them to complete or organize a game for them to play which summarizes the material learned that day.

Student behavior is controlled in a number of ways; most are consistent in every class I witnessed. Students remain quiet and well behaved while sitting in class. They rarely leave their desks, speak to their desk mates in hushed tones, and raise their hands in a deliberate manner before offering an answer. If a student is particularly eager to answer a question, however, that student is typically rewarded by being allowed to respond. A very strict code of conduct is followed in the relations between teacher and student. Before responding to a question the student says "Thua Co" or Thua Thay," which is a polite participle. The teacher refers to his or her primary students as Con not Em, which is used for older students.

One major force of discipline in most classrooms is a ruler. It is used to point to words and phrases to be repeated and when it is rapped on a desk students know to stop working and raise their boards to be evaluated. Rarely does a teacher need to hit the desk more than once. One teacher used her ruler to correct student posture by lightly touching the offending body part until the student adjusted. A translator mentioned that sometimes

rulers are used more forcefully with children, although that practice has decreased significantly in recent years. There are occasions when the energy level is higher, particularly just after the long morning break or after lunch, when the teacher allows a low buzz during lessons. However, usually they quiet down rather quickly and remain focused.

The students are quite respectful with each other as well. They are patient while others are answering and are kind when correcting. Most listen while one student is at the front and are willing to help those struggling next to them. In all classes there is a student monitor who tells peers to stand when a visitor enters and begins the class greetings and often leads the songs. This student also controls behavior during special events and takes his or her job very seriously. There does not appear to be much animosity among students towards the monitor who clearly has the teacher's favor.

The level of teacher education and experience is the same in both regions. Nearly every teacher and administrator that I spoke to had attended a college specifically for primary school teachers, mostly in Can Tho City. There were very new teachers and teachers who had been teaching for over thirty years at both types of schools. Most teachers taught their grade for the entire time they had been teaching and most administrators had been teachers previous to holding their current position.

Finally, when evaluating the standard Vietnamese classroom it is important to note that there is a fairly even balance of genders in every class. Furthermore, principals spoke proudly about students always attending class. There are very few occasions when the classes are not full. One teacher at Hoa An 1 described students who still came to

class during the flood season when water at the school and on the roads was halfway up the small students' legs.

Thus, there are a number of things one can expect to see at every Vietnamese primary school. There are certain to be well behaved orderly children at desks, repeating lessons, learning math facts and Vietnamese culture, and at break time they are all sure to be found running and laughing and playing around the courtyard. But upon closer inspection, there are some key differences hidden among these similarities.

2. Contrasting Rural and Urban Primary Schools

The differences between rural and urban education are far more complex than just their location. There are a diverse set of contrasting factors that play into the education of a child in a village and that of a child in Can Tho City, one of the five largest cities in Vietnam. The basis for these observable differences is in the funding sources and structure. Basic funding is provided for by the government. Parents in each district join Parents' Unions which pay for materials, school renovations, uniforms, and anything outside the basic curriculum. If parents cannot afford to join the Union it gives financial aid to those families for supplies and uniforms. The percentage of these students is small. For example, at Ngo Quyen, 100 of its 1800 students received some financial aid.

The reason there is a difference in funding for rural and urban schools is the Parents' Union. Parents in rural areas have less money, most are farmers or laborers. They have enough money for their students to attend required classes and own necessary materials, but not enough to give to the school for language teachers, school construction, or full day staff. The parents who do have more money pay for their students to attend

class a full day and take English classes. In the city the Parents' Unions are stronger and more able to build new schools and hire teachers for not just English, but also French and other extracurricular classes.

One would assume that more money buys a better education. But that can mean many different things. In the Mekong Delta this means better facilities, more diverse curriculum offerings, parental involvement, and care for the child's body, as well as his or her mind.

Facilities.

The two primary public schools that I visited in Can Tho are both very large, each with around 2,000 students. Their buildings are also huge and employ many staff members. Ngo Quyen, in particular, is a very impressive building. It was built in 1999 with four floors and a large completely enclosed courtyard with many trees and plants. The walls are white with red trim. The tile floors sparkle they are kept so clean. There is a parking lot for teachers and a side courtyard for parents to meet children at the end of the day. The wooden desks and chairs in classrooms are also quite new laminated wood and the chalkboards are all kept clean. It is located away from busy streets in a neighborhood with a high school, a middle school, and a nursery school.

Tran Quoc Toan is a little older. The walls are painted yellow and slightly faded. The courtyard is smaller, enclosed, and serves as a parking lot for staff as well. There are many plants all around, in classrooms and in the courtyard, and there are signs advising students to care for their environment. It has two floors and is set back from the busy street on which it is located. The desks are wooden and a little older. It is the only

school with fans in each classroom. The building is kept very neat and blackboards are new and well-maintained. There is a little bit of overcrowding as every desk is full and some teachers have fifty students.

VAPS is an entirely new type of school. It is very small with only eleven students who occupy one floor of a four story office building in downtown Can Tho. Their desks are brand new, very colorful laminated plastic with chairs instead of benches. Their walls are decorated with posters in English and Vietnamese and theirs is the only classroom not open air. They have a playground on a balcony and a lunchroom. There are several vacant classrooms for when the school expands.

Meanwhile, the first rural school, Hoa An 4, is radically different. The building is one story, stretched out around a courtyard facing the river and the road. The paint is yellow, similar to most schools in Vietnam, but molding and fading a bit. There are trees shading the courtyard with its broken pavement. To get to the school students must cross a steep concrete bridge. Classrooms are smaller and the wooden desks are worn from use. Extra desks are stacked at the back of the room. The open windows let in just enough light for students to see the board and their desks. Kinh Cung and Tan Binh 1 are very similar in construction to Hoa An 4. The only significant differences are in layout. Tan Binh 1 has two floors and Kinh Cung is a little more sprawling. These schools are also both just off of a very busy road on which buses, motorbikes, trucks, and military vehicles frequently travel. The road noise invades the classrooms through their open doors and windows.

Thus, having only observed the exterior and interior of each school building a significant number of differences were already evident. Students at the city schools are

more protected and isolated from the distractions of the outside world, their buildings are cleaner and newer and larger. The play spaces of the city schools are more comfortable and inviting, the classrooms more hospitable and conducive to concentration and learning. But these physical contrasts are just the beginning of what divides the rural from urban in Vietnamese education.

Full Day versus Half Day.

Probably the most significant difference is the amount of time that children spend at school. In the city nearly every child stays all day. The students at VAPS eat three meals a day at school. Every student at Ngo Quyen stays all day. They eat lunch and take naps at school, leaving around 4pm. At Tran Quoc Toan approximately 70% of the students stay all day. By contrast, at the rural schools far fewer students stay all day because their parents cannot afford it. At Hoa An 4 every student attends either the morning or afternoon session, but none attend both. At Kinh Cung one third of the students stay all day and at Tan Binh 1 half of the students study all day.

This pattern has three significant effects. First, the amount of time at school determines how much material is learned and how thoroughly it can be learned. This issue is closely related to the policy changes the government has made recently, requiring that schools teach an accelerated version of the lessons. Also, the curriculum offerings, specifically in the arena of foreign language, are different based on how much time the student spends at school. Finally, the atmosphere around a student's social and physical well-being is quite different when a student is at school all day instead of just several hours.

As the principal at Tan Binh 1 explained, most students have half the time to learn lessons intended to be taught in a full day. Full day students are taught lessons in the morning and are given “self-study” periods in the afternoon to review and consolidate information - the equivalent of homework. But with only a half day many teachers and students are falling behind. This doesn’t slow down the pace of the lessons, but it does leave many students to fend for themselves. Those who may need assistance with a concept, a math fact, or a spelling word are left without a venue for getting help. There isn’t really even a possibility of a teacher recognizing that students are falling behind, given the pace of lectures and exercises. One teacher discussed the fact that students are moving from one grade to the next without having earned good marks or fully learned the appropriate lessons. The students at rural schools do not fare as well on the national exams and this problem certainly starts in primary school.

Many of the students at rural schools who study all day do so because they are studying a foreign language. English classes are in the afternoon, prior to the self-study periods with their core teacher. At Tan Binh 1 30% of students study English starting in second grade. The other two rural schools do not have enough money to pay English teachers. Kinh Cung recently lost their English teachers to the neighboring high school.

Meanwhile, in the city, where nearly every student stays all day, most take a foreign language as well. In fact, the only city school where all students do not stay all day is Tran Quoc Toan and those are the students who are not taking either English or French. A recent phenomenon in the city schools involves out-of-district parents applying to either Tran Quoc Toan or Ngo Quyen, saying that they want their student to take French, knowing that it is one of the few schools offering the language. At Tran

Quoc Toan last year 136 students applied for the French program but the school was only able to accept 60. Parents are desperate to get their children into these superior schools.

Other advantages to staying all day include time for extracurricular subjects like computers, football, swimming, and dance. They are also able to take more periods of existing subjects like art and music. The French program at Ngo Quyen, for example, offers 12 periods a week of intensive French. These are all opportunities completely inaccessible to children whose parents can only afford for them to stay half day.

One final note about students who are able to stay the full day is the emotional and physical health of the child. The city schools each make significant and obvious attempts to care for their students. At Ngo Quyen during break time the students drink milk. Tran Quoc Toan is paid monthly visits by nurses and doctors to check on students' health. The school also keeps a full time doctor and nurse on staff. If a student is sick their parents bring him or her to school. The students who eat lunch at school are assured of eating a full and healthy meal. Those Tran Quoc Toan dutifully finish their meal of rice, pork, and vegetables. They then all brush their teeth, wash their faces, and take naps in their classrooms. It is this commitment to student health which is only possible for students who stay the entire day.

Another major difference between the rural and urban schools is the city schools' employment of what are like "school mothers." These are women who follow children around at break time with toothbrushes, sweeping up after them, preparing meals and nap beds, and making sure they eat all of their lunches. They are friendly and the students' clearly feel comfortable with them. They stay with the children during lunch time while teachers go home to eat and rest. They are consistent and dependable and a great force in

a child's life when they are expected to stay at school all day. The rural schools have neither the need nor ability to employ such women; unfortunately this is perhaps why one sees candy in the hands of first graders and sugary soft drinks in the hand of fourth graders during breaks at rural schools.

I would probably not have noticed it unless it had been pointed out by my translator, but students in the rural areas are thinner, shorter, and less healthy looking . At the urban schools there were a larger proportion of slightly overweight students, students with glasses, and taller students. This is likely more a product of family economic difference than one of the particular school, but a school's attitude towards health also has an affect on overall well-being.

Parents.

In interviews with teachers I asked them how much communication they each had with parents. The first grade teacher at Hoa An 4 only speaks with parents if a student is absent for a long time or something is wrong. She relies mostly on report cards and written comments. Her students commute by themselves from home to school and she does not have much chance to communicate with parents as they too, are very busy. By comparison, the teachers at the urban schools schedule regular meetings with their students' parents. Several times a year they have private conversations about student performance and attendance in addition to report cards. Furthermore, because students mostly attend school farther away from home on busier streets, parents come to pick up their students and thus have more contact with teachers.

Surveys.

The results from the surveys are very interesting and reflect some anticipated and some unanticipated differences between the students at each type of school. All of the students at VAPS attended both nursery school and kindergarten. All of the students at Ngo Quyen and Tran Quoc Toan attended kindergarten and about half attended nursery school. Hoa An 4 does not have a nursery school or kindergarten in the area and the students at Tan Binh 1 and Kinh Cung had all attended kindergarten while none attended nursery school.

Across the board the students favored art more than any other subject. The most popular future jobs were teacher and doctor among all students. There was the greatest diversity of responses in both categories at Tran Quoc Toan. There was the least diversity at Kinh Cung and Tan Binh 1, as nearly every student at both schools wrote that they liked art best and would like to be a doctor or teacher.

School	Future Job Avg.	Father's Job Avg.	Mother's Job Avg.
VAPS	2.64	2.3	1.9
Ngo Quyen	2.16	2.11	1.84
Tran Quoc Toan	2.42	2.33	2.37
Hoa An 4	1.93	1.5	1.21
Tan Binh 1	2.74	1.03	1
Kinh Cung	2.71	1.18	1.09

Table 1. Average numerical value of level of education required for each job. On a scale of 1-3, 3 is the highest level of education and 1 the lowest.

From this chart one can interpret that the students at all schools wish to have jobs with high levels of education, or jobs with a great deal of respect in the Vietnamese community. Teacher and doctor, both rated a 3, are well respected positions. The numbers are quite different for the fathers of students in rural and urban communities. It can be extrapolated that fathers in urban areas hold jobs which require more education.

The women also demonstrate a difference, though it is not quite as significant. This is likely because many of the mothers in both types of communities were described as “housewives” by their children. The differences highlighted in this brief survey are not particularly surprising, although it is nice to see that children in both types of schools are ambitious. (For full survey results and a copy of the survey itself see Appendix.)

3. Education for the Whole Child

Clearly one can see a difference between the educational opportunities provided for children in rural schools and children in urban schools. This means a particular set of things for the individual child. Mostly, it means a loss of choices for the rural student. Without a foreign language many Vietnamese are relegated to jobs in the industrial or agricultural sector, as trade, business, and service jobs frequently now require English speakers. The loss of options means that students may become disinterested in school. They are less likely to be motivated to continue their formal education if it fails to engage them.

A child at an urban school is given a head start: a chance to make choices, to develop interests, tastes, and skills that will be useful in the growing industry. The students at urban schools are cared for by people who attend to more than just their growing minds. They also make health and happiness a priority. Children at urban schools are learning the amount of material they are intended to learn, in the amount of time that it is intended to be taught. In a society based on family and collective work, children gain more independence by being at school all day. They are challenged by this

difference and asked to develop skills at an early age which will allow them to be away from their parents longer than their rural counterparts.

In sum, the urban schools are caring for the whole child: body and mind. They are advancing Vietnam student by student as they create more English speakers, more students who are independent minded and willing to take chances. The material may be the same, but the attitude at an urban school is one of progress, while rural schools are struggling to maintain the status quo.

Limitations

There are a few things which may have altered my data. First of all, the majority of the information is from observations in classrooms. Observing and recording events that take place in a class where I only understand small pieces means that there is a lot that I miss. Even with a translator telling me some of student responses and teacher commands, the translator, whether he or she is aware of it, acts as a filter for the information I am able to record. The translator translates for me the details that he or she perceives to be crucial. These might be completely different from what I would record on my own. So, there is a possible bias in my data about classroom management, student behavior, and responses.

Some of the other problems were outside my control. As an American I am often perceived as an oddity, an outsider, and somewhat suspicious. Students swarmed me, teachers looked askance, and administrators were wary of telling me anything too revealing. On several occasions I guessed that principals were not being entirely honest with me about their schools' enrollment or attrition rates. For example, at one school the principal insisted that all students went on to lower secondary school. There were charts on the wall showing improvement over time, but the numbers certainly did not indicate that every student graduated from fifth grade. There is little I can do to avoid this problem as questioning the facts presented would certainly not make me any more welcome.

Unfortunately my survey ended up being a small portion of my data. I intended to use the survey with older children. The text was not large and it required students to fill in blanks. But because there were only first grade students at VAPS I had to continue

with first graders to maintain some scientific validity. This presented two problems. Some of the students didn't know if they had been to nursery school or kindergarten and others weren't sure what their parents' jobs were. Also, students were unable to complete the survey by themselves. In one school this meant that my translator and I took primary responsibility for helping students. In several classes I watched as teachers led the class together in completing the survey. Typically this meant that teachers asked the class what the "answers" were. The class answered in unison, as they are taught. Two sets of surveys were completed outside of my presence so I have no idea how much assistance the students were given. Some of the handwriting was clearly not student handwriting. In the end, I cannot trust very many of the responses on the surveys.

Finally, I did not get to pick the schools that I visited. This meant that I ended up at the three of the best schools in Can Tho and three of the higher end schools in rural areas. A wider range of schools in the city and villages would have been preferable. But I was limited by time.

None of these issues are so problematic that I should have to question all of my data or conclusions, but they are interesting points to note when considering my findings. If I were to conduct this study again I would love to have more time and a chance to refine my methodology.

Conclusion

The Vietnamese emphasis on literacy, education, and academia is commendable. It is a wonderful attitude with which to begin a global reputation. With 94% Vietnam has one of the highest literacy rates of any developing country. This is directly due to government funding and its focus on schools for every child. They have certainly succeeded in some respects. The schools are there. The students are in the schools. The teachers are in front of the students. The students are learning how to add and subtract, to spell, and to listen. But schools are approaching education differently and that is what needs to be addressed.

The differences established here are not what was projected. I predicted that rural schools would have less qualified teachers with little experience, far more boys than girls would crowd each classroom, lessons would lag behind urban schools, and students would assume they will follow their parents in employment. What I found instead were the bases for wonderful schools: trained and motivated teachers, balanced genders with great ambition, and the same curriculum everywhere. The real question now is how to make the best use of this groundwork to generate equal schools and equal students. In other words, what can be done with the little funding there is.

The government is in a tough position, asked to provide education for all with a limited budget. They have determined that it is most important for students to learn how to read and write, add and subtract, and sing songs. One wonders then, what could be possible if the focus was the child, not the number of facts they can learn each day. Possibly a redirection of attitudes and resources with the happiness, livelihoods, and

future of the child at the center is what the situation demands. For example, maybe it would be okay to substitute one math class once a week for a health class.

Funding is a more difficult issue, and the real root of the differences between rural and urban schools. Incomes are lower in rural areas and that is not likely to change any time soon. Instead of accelerating curriculum for everyone, the school system can use those resources to provide full day education for students at rural schools. Perhaps language teachers can be shared among schools, at least exposing students to English, giving them a chance to compete for jobs later. Any attempt at a level playing field is a bold bid for equal education.

This disparity between rural and urban schools is by no means endemic to Vietnam. It is a significant problem in even the most developed and wealthy countries in the world. But if Vietnam can address the issue now, while there is such momentum, such demand, and such a rapidly growing population, they will have a significant advantage over other nations. If officials can remember to keep the whole child at the center of the issue then primary education in Vietnam has a promising future.

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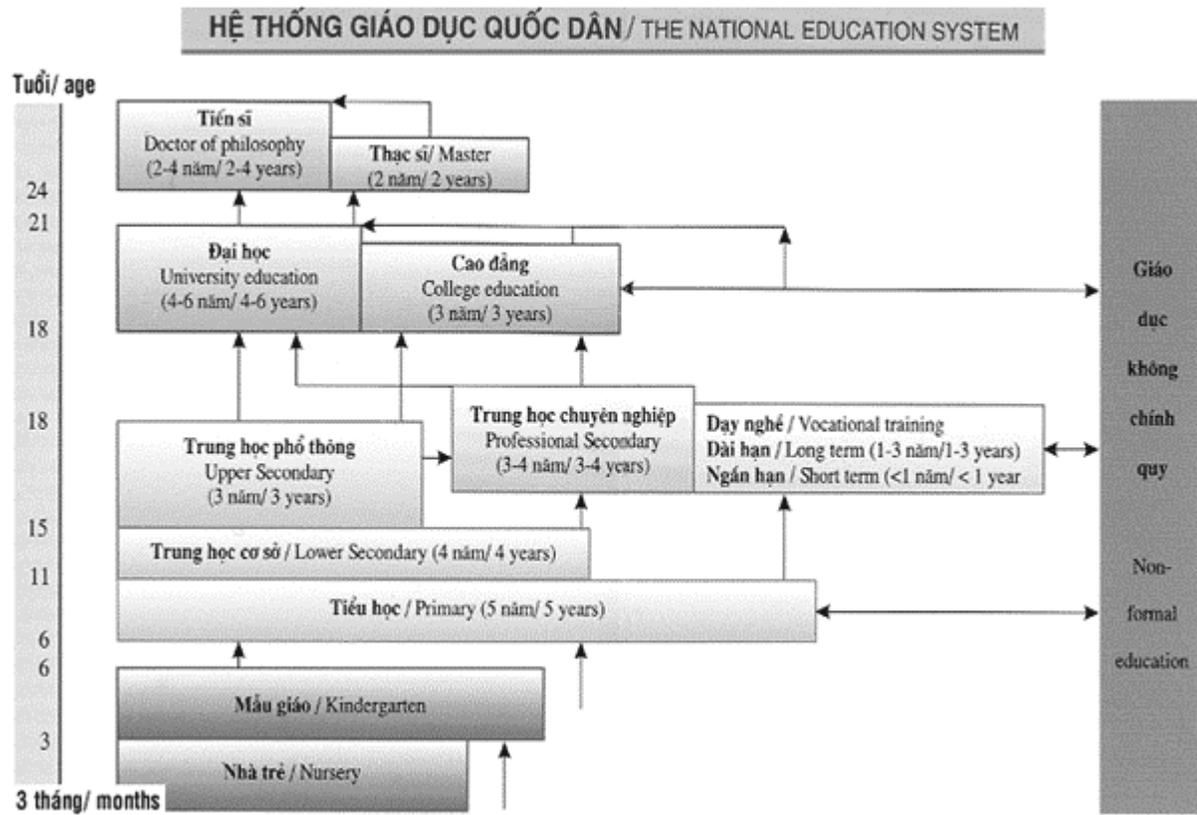
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Note: Some educators that I spoke to did not give me their full names. I have just recorded their given names to preserve their privacy.

Appendix 1: The structure of the Vietnamese education system.



Source: <http://edu.net.vn/data/doc/hethonggiaoduc/>

Appendix 2: The survey distributed to students. Translated with the help of Ngo Mi Le Anh.

Phiếu Tìm Hiểu
(Survey)

Mời các em trả lời các câu hỏi dưới đây. Nếu có câu hỏi nào các em không thích, các em có thể không trả lời.

(Please answer the following questions. If there are questions you don't like, you don't have to answer them.)

1. Tuổi _____
(age)

2. Nam _____ Nữ _____ (Đánh dấu X để chọn)
(male) (female) (mark an X)

3. Trước đây, em có đi nhà trẻ hay đi mẫu giáo không?
(Previously, did you attend nursery school or kindergarten?)

4. Nếu có, lúc đó, em bao nhiêu tuổi?
(If yes, at that time, how old were you?)

Nhà trẻ: _____ tuổi
(Nursery)

Mẫu giáo: _____ tuổi
(Kindergarten)

5. Em thích học môn nào nhất?
(Which subject do you like best?)

6. Sau này, em thích làm nghề gì?
(In the future, what job would you like to have?)

7. Ba Mẹ em làm nghề gì?
(What are your parents' jobs?)

Ba _____
(Father)

Mẹ _____
(Mother)