

The cautionary tale of Vietnam's 'radical reform'

Despite an impressive Pisa ranking, the country is remodelling its education system along Western lines. But the top-down changes risk alienating teachers

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IN 2012, Vietnam surprised the education world, and itself, by achieving a ranking of 17th among 65 nations participating in the Pisa (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests run by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

It was the first time Vietnam had entered Pisa. As a developing country in South East Asia, it was not expected to outperform England, the US, Norway and Sweden. And yet, Vietnam's 15-year-olds did better than their English peers in maths, science and reading.

No one was surprised that the top seven places in the Pisa 2012 rankings were occupied by Asian systems – namely Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Macao and Japan. These are all relatively prosperous, developed countries. On the other hand, Vietnam, with a population of nearly 100 million, has significant poverty and its education system is starved of resources.

Against this picture of Vietnam's international achievement, it was just as surprising that, at about the same time as the Pisa results were published, the government announced a programme of "radical and comprehensive educational renovation" to its schools. It decided that nothing less than wholesale change to the curriculum and textbooks, pedagogy, assessment, teacher CPD, and leadership and management was required. But what could be wrong with a school system that had just surpassed all expectations in Pisa?

Skills for the 21st century

Vietnam's leaders were astute in realising what Pisa does and does not measure. The country's traditional, didactic teaching methods, excellent textbooks that are strictly adhered to by teachers and students, rote memorisation and testing – all align with requirements for Pisa success. These fail, however, to prepare and develop a future workforce equipped with the understanding and skills demanded of a 21st-century knowledge-based economy that is globally competitive.

Hence the need for teaching and assessment to refocus on applied knowledge, creativity, problem-solving and teamwork – all of which demand more student-centred approaches.

This rebalancing process between academic achievement and an applied-knowledge skill



ONE DIRECTION: Will Vietnam's education reforms see students' exam performance continue to improve?

set appropriate for a modern economy invites the question: to what extent can the two goals be integrated in curriculum and classroom practice? On the face of it, each seems to require different curricular and pedagogical approaches, and thus necessitates separate timetable space.

Interestingly, Vietnam is not alone in reorientating its curriculum. Similar reforms are happening in other top-performing Asian systems. Singapore and Hong Kong, for instance – both renowned for their emphasis on didactic, whole-class teaching and testing regimes – are introducing more student-centred, liberal curricula and pedagogies.

In other words, the high-performing Asian systems are moving in the direction of Anglo-American systems by adopting a more liberal approach. Ironically, teachers in England will point out that their system is moving in the opposite direction – towards more whole-class teaching and testing.

Wholesale renovation of a school system – involving curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, CPD and leadership – presents huge disruption and huge challenges to all who work in it, at national, regional, local and school level. So

when is the best time for nations to undertake whole-system reform? It may be that policymakers in these top-performing Asian systems think they are well placed to embark on reform precisely because they are currently enjoying the status and confidence that comes with their high Pisa rankings. As with businesses, the best time to innovate and move forward is when you are seen as successful.

Inadequate communication means that teachers are ambivalent. Does that sound familiar?

However, while this may be the thinking behind the reforms, it prompts the question of whether teachers and parents necessarily buy in to the new vision and values on which they are based.

The potential dichotomy between system-level policymakers as reform zealots, and headteachers and teachers as brakes on change is not, of course, confined to Asian systems. It has been apparent in England's school system for many years. Beside the

different perspectives and value-orientations of policymakers and professionals, a major cause of conflict is the huge challenge placed on schools to implement reforms.

In Vietnam, as in England, the reforms are multiple, simultaneous and likely to continue for a decade or more. Moreover, so far there is little indication of extra government resources for schools to help them cope with the challenges of implementation – a scenario that will be all-too-familiar to *TES* readers. Indeed I have been taking part in a large-scale research project into attitudes to reform among principals and teachers in Hanoi (see box, below).

Same old story?

Despite the differences between England and Vietnam – not least the latter's top-down Communist regime – there are extraordinary similarities. Teachers there claim that they have not been given a clear rationale for the reforms and do not appreciate the nature and extent of the changes being thrust upon them.

There is fear and stress among teachers about their capacity to cope, and the lack of provision of extra resources to meet the new policies and practices expected.

A particular conundrum for Vietnam, given the lack of additional resources, is how can student-centred teaching and learning be introduced in classes of 40 or more? Furthermore, how can student-centred teaching be facilitated when there is a clear intention to maintain heavy reliance on the use of textbooks? Answers are needed to these questions.

One consequence of the inadequate top-down communication is that teachers are ambivalent about the new professional knowledge and skills they need, therefore they don't realise what they require in terms of CPD. Does that sound familiar? ●



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Teachers' perspective

To explore the impact of Vietnam's school reforms, academics from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, at the University of Glasgow, have joined forces with Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences (the government's research branch). They will examine the perspectives of principals and teachers in a sample of primary and secondary schools in Hanoi and its environs.

The project – jointly funded by the British Council (Vietnam) and the University of Glasgow – aims to elicit schools' perspectives on implementing the reforms, and ultimately build capacity to empower principals and teachers. The findings are due to be disseminated at a conference in Hanoi at the end of June.