

Vietnam's Basic Education Quality in the Wake of Standardization Policy and National Curriculum Reform

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Vietnam's education development has been characterized as a success with impressive achievements in school enrolment and international standardized tests. The country's outstanding performance is perceived to result from multiple factors such as purposeful policy, high levels of accountability and quality teaching. Among the recent policy changes for education quality enhancement, the adoption of the competency-based curriculum and professional standards for teachers is of heightened importance that has been observed in Vietnam's current reform. This paper seeks an updated understanding of and explanations for the sector's recent performance in terms of education quality. The study focuses on policy efforts and actual changes in the curriculum, teacher management and school-level standards management that aim to improve the quality of basic education. Drawing on a critical analysis of national policy, education reports and the related literature, this study highlights important developments and multiple challenges Vietnam experiences in implementing the standardization policy. Relevant implications for educational policy and practice in Vietnam and other countries will also be discussed.

Keywords: Basic education; education quality; standardization policy; education reform; Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Countries globally have implemented various reform policies to improve their education. Compulsory in most education systems, basic education receives significant attention from the governments in terms of access and quality. As a lower middle-income country, Vietnam's education development has been portrayed

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as a success story with impressive achievements in school enrolment and international standardized tests (Dang and Glewwe 2018; Parandekar and Sedmik 2016). The country's outstanding performance arguably results from multiple factors, including purposeful policy, high levels of accountability, quality teaching and school leadership (McAleavy et al. 2018). Among recent policy changes for quality enhancement of its general education, the adoption of the competency-based curriculum and professional standards for teachers is of heightened importance that has been observed in Vietnam's current education reform. However, little has been known about the process of implementing the standardization policy and the challenges Vietnam continues to address in its efforts to achieve a quality education.

This paper seeks to gain an updated understanding of Vietnam's basic education quality through critical analysis and reflection on issues around the standardization of the curriculum and the teaching workforce in Vietnam. The paper draws on a thematic, critical analysis of government documents, national curricula, materials for teacher training and education reports, in addition to a review of academic literature and relevant media coverage. Focusing on the process of policy implementation, we demonstrate that Vietnam still struggles to enhance its education quality due to the multiple challenges it faces. This study sheds light on the complex process of implementing policies for enhancing education quality in low- and middle-income countries like Vietnam. The paper begins with an overview of Vietnam's education system and renewed policy commitments to improving the quality of its basic education. After reviewing policy initiatives to improve the quality of basic education, we analyse and discuss major changes and difficulties associated with the implementation of the standardization policy. Finally, we suggest implications for policy and practice related to standardization, which are relevant to Vietnam and other countries with similar socio-economic conditions.

2. An Overview of Vietnam's Education System and Efforts to Improve Education Quality

Vietnam education is a centralized system, with the Ministry of Education and Training overseeing most technical educational matters. Its twelve-grade school system has three levels: primary education, lower secondary and upper secondary education. According to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (2011), basic education in Vietnam consists of primary education (Grades 1–5) and lower secondary education (Grades 6–9). With a growing population of 96 million people, more than half of whom are under the age of thirty-five, Vietnam has paid much attention to developing human capital to promote economic growth as part of the national modernization and industrialization project. The country has consistently committed to allocating 20 per cent of the state budget for public education—higher than the average investment of most neighbouring countries (MOET 2017).

Despite its modest position as a lower-middle-income country, Vietnam has been known for its remarkable achievements in education. According to Dang and Glewwe (2018), the country's school enrolment rates are close to 100 per cent at both the primary and lower secondary levels. The completed years of schooling are also high in comparison with other countries with similar GDPs. The literacy rates in Vietnam have also been consistently high, at around 96 per cent in the last several years. Particularly, Vietnam has been considered a high performer in international standardized tests such as the OECD's PISA, compared to many other countries at its level of income (Thien et al. 2016; Dang et al. 2021; Asadullah, Perera, and Xiao 2020).

Several research studies have attempted to explain Vietnam's educational success around learning. Based on statistical analysis, Dang et al. (2021) indicate that, on the 2012 and 2015 PISA assessments, Vietnam is a significant positive outlier conditional on its income. Yet, the authors suggest that Vietnam's contemporary outlier status can be explained little by the observable characteristics of participating students, their households and schools. Meanwhile, Asadullah, Perera, and Xiao (2020) argue that cultural factors, such as pro-learning attitudes, parental commitment and aspirations, could better explain Vietnam's

surprising PISA performance. A mixed-methods study conducted by McAleavy et al. (2018) identifies five factors to understand Vietnam's achievements in education. These factors include purposeful policy, high levels of accountability, quality teaching and school leadership. From the perspectives of educational sociology and political economy, London (2021) argues that Vietnam's education performance should be interpreted in the context in which the education system is embedded and enmeshed with various social, institutional and normative features of its social environment. Among factors contributing to Vietnam's successes in learning, he stresses the importance of both the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) political commitment and public engagement in education.

Despite different perspectives, many scholars concur that the government's prioritization of education and purposeful policies have played a critical role in driving education reform in Vietnam. Regarding this notion, there are two points to note. First, it is observed that Vietnam has increasingly tended to the quality of education when most of its universalization of education goals has been achieved. There are various definitions of quality in education in the international literature. For example, in the context of higher education, quality can be conceptualized as an exception, as perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and as transformative (Harvey and Green 1993). Drawing on the social justice and capability approaches to defining education quality, Tikly and Barrett (2013) attempt to bring the concept of education quality closer to the notion of human development. In Vietnam, as will be explained in detail in the next section, there is a tendency to adopt the idea of quality as "fitness for purpose". Such an approach to quality assurance initially applied in Vietnam's higher education sector is now gaining more attention in school education.

Second, given the distinct political features in Vietnam,¹ policy development and implementation embody a strong commitment to political will. Vietnam has espoused policy strategies aimed at standardizing the education system to enhance its basic education quality. Nevertheless, far from being linear and straightforward processes, policy development and implementation are often influenced and confounded by multiple complex factors. Meanwhile, limited empirical research has examined the extent to which education policy in Vietnam has achieved its goals, or critically reviewed (un)intended consequences associated with the process of enacting a given policy. As a result, despite political determination and well-intended policies, ample evidence suggests that significant gaps between policy and practice remain. This paper, rather than ambitiously seeking an answer to the question about Vietnam's success, takes the view that it is essential to deeply understand what is happening in the process of striving for quality education. Along these lines, we believe that policy is a process (Ball 1994; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). Policy development and enactment need to be informed by frequent evaluation and reflection to generate as few unintended consequences as possible. The following section continues to review the context in which standardization approaches take shape in Vietnam, and how the related policies are developed and put into practice to improve the quality of basic education.

3. Improving Education Quality through Standardization Policies

Since the standards movement began in the late 1980s, the adoption of standards has been emphasized to enhance the quality and efficiency of education. The recent decades have seen a growing movement towards quality and standards in education in many countries (OECD 1995; Sahlberg 2011), and Vietnam is no exception. What has been observed in Vietnam's education policies and practices (CPV 2013; MOET 2018b, 2018c; World Bank 2016) fits into two new major directions in "policy borrowing" (Steiner-Khamsi 2016). The first is the standardization movement in educational systems, and the second is the global spread of reform packages such as quality assurance in higher education or standards-based education reform in schools.

Standardization spurred by the standards movement emerged as a critical component of education reform efforts. The pursuit of standards is intended for all students to meet performance standards in education and provide them with adequate opportunities and resources to achieve these standards. It aims at raising the level of academic attainment across national populations through standards settings (OECD 1995). In this regard, implementation of standards often requires the development of curriculum, teaching force and educational management to be aligned with the pre-set standards.

Vietnam has sought to raise the education quality by following a policy of standardizing the education system. This policy is framed by the CPV's Resolution 29, issued in 2013, which set the stage for the "Fundamental and Comprehensive Reform of Education and Training" nationally (hereafter referred to as the comprehensive education reform). This reform constitutes a political and legislative framework for a period of substantial change to Vietnam's education in order to "meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization in the socialism-oriented market economy and international integration" (CPV 2013). The implementation of standardization policies to revamp the education system involves the introduction of a competency-based curriculum, the adoption of professional standards for teachers and school leaders, and standards-based quality management in school. At the heart of these policies is the idea of enhancing the education quality associated with standards.

Consistent with the CPV's Resolution 29 are two significant policies related to standardization in basic education. The first one is the "Reform of the National Curriculum and Textbooks" policy (Vietnam National Assembly 2014), and the second is the "National Standards-Based School Accreditation" policy (MOET 2018a, 2020a). One of the motivations for Vietnam's increasing interest in a standards-based approach to education reform concerns its evolving international partnerships and cooperation. For example, Vietnam's membership in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2016 has led to a significant awareness of the demand for a high-quality labour force. The accentuated need to build high-quality human resources to increase the country's competitive edge and satisfy regional and international standards for the labour market results in national qualification frameworks in different aspects of the education system (MOET 2020a; MOLISA 2014). In this light, there is extensive support for quality as fitness for purpose in state agendas and national strategies for human resources development. This conception of quality is demonstrated in government documents related to education, for example:

The overall objective: By 2020, our country's education will have fundamentally and comprehensively transformed in the direction of standardization, modernization, socialization, democratization and international integration; the quality of education will have been substantially improved (GoV 2012).

Education quality is the fulfilment of the objectives of the educational institution or the educational program, and the requirements of the Education Law in accordance with the needs of using human resources for the socio-economic development of the locality and the whole country (MOET 2012).

Curricula are designed to represent the educational goals, to stipulate standards of knowledge, skills, scope and structure of educational content, methods, and forms of organizing educational activities, and assessing educational results in every subject, every grade or training levels (Education Law 2009, Art. 6).

The promotion of quality as fitness for purpose comes with a consensus about defining quality based on standards. In fact, standards and standardization have been frequent discourses in education policy since the 2010s. Standardization as a policy solution to quality is evident in different components of the education system such as curriculum, and management of resources in education programmes, especially the teaching force both in school and higher education (CPV 2013; GoV 2012; MOET 2009, 2018b). The following sections provide an overview of the standardization policy as reflected in three key initiatives to

enhance the quality of basic education in Vietnam: (i) reforming the curriculum focusing on competency standards, (ii) standardizing the teaching force, and (iii) applying standards-based quality management in school.

3.1 Curriculum Reform: A Transformation from Content-Based to a Competency-Based Curriculum

Many scholars noted the central role of international organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the European Union in conceptualizing the notion of competence and integrating competency-based approaches into national curricula across the world (Halász and Michel 2011; Steiner-Khamsi 2016; Takayama 2013; Anderson-Levitt and Gardinier 2021). Our investigation into the literature on curriculum development in Vietnam suggests that the country's endorsement of the competency-based approach took shape in the context of the global education reform movement towards CBE.

The comprehensive education reform project, supported by the World Bank, has facilitated the transformation of the national curriculum over the last decade. The specific objective of this project is to improve the quality of teaching and learning by: (i) implementing the competency-based curriculum and (ii) improving the effectiveness of instruction by developing textbooks aligned with the new curriculum (World Bank 2016).

As for the first objective, the new curriculum, also known as the 2018 National Curriculum, was officially implemented in 2020, after two years of postponement. It aims to develop Vietnamese students' competencies translated into outcome standards. As it states:

The new National Curriculum is designed to continue to develop the necessary qualities and competencies for an employee, civic awareness and personality, the ability to self-study, lifelong learning awareness, and the ability to choose an occupation suitable to one's capacities and interests, their conditions and circumstances to pursue higher education or vocational education or engage in working life, and the ability to adapt to change in the context of globalization and the new industrial revolution (MOET 2018a).

The new curriculum was developed with an explicit focus on a standards-driven approach. As will be discussed in the later section, this policy was developed in accordance with the global education reform movements towards competency-based approaches. The standards-driven policy shows a marked tendency to evaluate the education provision by considering whether the learning outcomes fit the stated purposes and objectives, ones that should faithfully reflect the CPV and the State's political and philosophical underpinnings.

With regard to the second objective, multiple sets of textbooks have been developed in alignment with the new competency-based curriculum. Over the last two decades, a single set of state-sanctioned textbooks has been used across schools throughout the country (except for private schools, which may develop their own learning materials approved by the MOET). With the roll-out of the new curriculum, local provinces can now decide on the sets of textbooks most relevant to their localities' socio-cultural characteristics and needs. It is hoped that the adoption of multiple textbooks and a competency-based curriculum will usher in a faster shift towards progressive pedagogies such as active learning and student-centred approaches.

3.2 Standardizing the Teaching Force: Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders

The effort to improve the teaching force quality strongly engages with the idea of standards-driven education. Teacher professionalization is, in fact, part of the more comprehensive policy initiative to professionalize public servants across all professions. To assure the quality of the teaching profession, the government has applied professional standards for teachers and school leaders; for example, standards for

secondary-level teachers were introduced in 2009. While these standards are mainly aimed at in-service teachers, their scope of application includes stakeholders in pre-service teacher training as they provide a basis for developing training programmes for secondary school teachers (MOET 2009). These standards have recently been replaced with the Professional Standards for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools (MOET 2018b). As such, educational institutions across the country are adjusting to a range of standards that are set to redefine the quality of teachers, teacher preparation, and teacher professional development.

3.3 Standards-Based Quality Management in Schools

In the developing quality assurance system in Vietnam, accreditation is regarded as a foundational mechanism for managing the quality of education. By law, “accreditation is the main measure to determine the level of implementation of educational objectives, programs and contents in schools and other educational institutions” (Education Law 2009, Art. 17). In basic education, the Fundamental School Quality Level regulation issued in 2006 establishes minimum standards for physical facilities, school organization and management, teaching materials and teacher support and school-parent linkages for primary students (World Bank 2011).

In 2018, MOET issued three circulars regulating the accreditation of education quality and recognizing the achievement of national standards for kindergartens, primary schools and lower and upper secondary schools. The objectives of accreditation in education are to:

identify schools that meet the educational goals in each period; make quality improvement plans; maintain and improve the quality of school practices; publicly notify public administrative bodies and society about the quality status of schools; for public administrative bodies agencies to evaluate and grant recognition of schools that gain accreditation” (MOET 2018a).

With the perception that standard-based quality management is part of quality assurance, the educational administrative bodies emphasize an expectation of mutual impact between quality accreditation, quality assurance and quality culture in educational institutions, which is governed by law (MOET 2020a).

4. Reflections on the Implementation of the Standardization Policy

In this section, we discuss the above-presented issues—the new curriculum, teacher professionalization, and quality management at school—in light of the ongoing changes and associated challenges in the implementation of the standardization policy.

4.1 Curriculum: Changes in Progress and Limitations

The competency-based approach to the new curriculum is developed in a way that is aligned with the creation of outcome standards across the grades in both primary and secondary education. Accordingly, schools and teachers across the country are adapting to the new sets of competency standards, replacing the conventional framework believed to be academic content-focused and exam-oriented. Nevertheless, the implementation of the competency-based curriculum with competency standards faces various limitations and challenges, some of which are discussed in the next sections.

4.1.1 A Lack of a Standards-Referenced Data System. One of the benefits of competency-based education (CBE) is the formation of a fully transparent system that can adapt and address the needs of individual students. As such, schools implementing the competency-based curriculum should have adopted some

level of the standards-referenced approach, with instruction, assessment and recording aligned to standards. As information about individual students and their learning relative to standards drives the decisions within a CBE system, gathering standards-based data and analysing them are foundational components of scheduling. Scheduling relies on two sets of student data: (i) grade-level data, which support schools' broader grouping of students into classes, and (ii) specific standards data, which support the placement of individual students (Finn III and Finn 2020).

A major challenge to Vietnam's schools in the shift to CBE is a lack of a standards-referenced data system. The new general curriculum and subject curricula include the descriptions of required competencies. Still, there is an absence of a database regarding the existing proficiency of students with reference to the competencies standards, as well as a concrete plan to develop such a data system in the near future.

Theoretically, if fuelled and ensured by robust data from the formative assessment, a CBE system allows for student progression decisions at the end of the level. Meanwhile, the educational assessment system in Vietnam has gradually transitioned from the assessment of learning outcome to the assessment of student progress and competence development across subjects (VNIES 2021). Unfortunately, assessment has been more regularly used to rank academic achievement and grade advancement rather than improving pedagogies and evaluating the development of students' capacities (Manh and Duong 2021; Nghiem-Hue 2021). Notably, the practice of formative assessment has faced psychological barriers from students, parents and the wider communities. In other words, formative assessment has not yet been used properly to diagnose students' difficulties and promote understanding of learning goals and criteria for competency development.

4.1.2 A Shortage of Resources for Competency-Based Teaching and Learning. The characteristics of CBE set itself a great difference from conventional education models, particularly in terms of enabling individual students to fulfil their potential for competency development. For example, in a CBE environment, students have not only a voice but also choices in the teaching and learning process; thus, student agency should be encouraged to develop. Students also have multiple opportunities and ways to learn specific content at their own pace, and they move on to the next level within a subject area only after they have demonstrated proficiency at the current level (Marzano et al. 2017). CBE also enables students to think beyond the confines of the classroom and understand that what they learn should be applied in their lives beyond school. Adopting a competency-based curriculum, therefore, needs a provision of extensive and suitable resources for schools.

Vietnam embarked on a competency-based curriculum while there was an acute shortage of resources for teaching and learning in a CBE system. In public schools, where 89 per cent of all students in the country attend (MOET 2021), students are grouped and scheduled according to their ages rather than their learning needs and competence. Schools currently operate on a school-year basis, which does not enable students to learn content at their own pace. Moreover, curriculum implementation must comply with the schedules prescribed and supervised by the central and municipal administrative bodies. Thus, students are supposed to advance to higher grades as long as they successfully complete the school year.

In addition, the availability of teaching materials and the quality of the infrastructure in schools, particularly in satellite areas in Vietnam, remains below the desired level despite the substantial improvement in school inputs and teacher training levels in the past years (MOET 2021). A standard class is designed for a maximum of thirty-five in primary schools and forty-five pupils in secondary schools (MOET 2020a). Yet, the large class size due to the shortage of schools is a serious problem in most big cities in Vietnam. For example, in some districts in Hanoi, a class accommodates sixty, even sixty-nine pupils (see Nguyen 2018). This is an enormous obstacle to progressive teaching and learning approaches,

particularly ones that emphasize collaboration and interaction such as student-centred learning (MOET 2018a; World Bank 2016).

4.1.3 Limited Teacher Agency in Relation to Textbooks. Another obstacle to implementing the competency-based curriculum involves the decision-making capacity of teachers who enact the curriculum. Teacher decision-making capacity in relation to changes in policy may be seen as a form of teacher agency or “a response to or reaction against the educational policy, as shaped by the material and social conditions within which teachers work” (Priestley et al. 2012, p. 7; Nguyen and Bui 2016). In this regard, limited teacher agency in Vietnam is considered in terms of the lack of teachers’ active involvement in choosing textbooks and the flexible use of learning materials.

As mentioned earlier, under the new “one curriculum, multiple sets of textbooks” policy, schools, in consultation with the provincial People’s Committee, can make recommendations on the relevant textbooks to be used (MOET 2020b). Nevertheless, both schools and teachers have not been the final decision-making agents regarding the chosen textbooks. The complex mechanism and limited time in the process have, in effect, hindered schools and teachers from actively participating in the selection of textbooks that they are the ones to use. As a result, many teachers took a formalistic approach to textbook selection (Nguyen 2021), meaning that they were not attentive and serious enough in choosing the textbooks which should be most relevant to their students’ needs and characteristics.

The lack of teacher agency has been more evident in the use of textbooks even before the new competency-based curriculum. In fact, it is a deep-rooted tradition in the Vietnamese schooling system that textbooks are viewed as a key input in teaching and learning. In the teaching and learning process, the teacher-student relationship in Vietnam is often characterized by the students’ compliance with their teacher who is regarded as “the master of knowledge” (Le 2018; Nguyen et al. 2005; Pham 2008; Saito, Tsukui, and Tanaka 2008; Nguyen 2020). Some studies indicate that, while Vietnamese teachers tend to be receptive to the ideas of progressive educational innovation, many continue to play the role of knowledge transmitters whose teaching practice shows a reproduction of rigidity, conformity and textbook dependency (Le 2018; Nguyen and Hall 2017). This reality reflects the historical centrality of textbooks in Vietnam’s education, where teachers are also expected to endorse and inculcate the official ethos. The roll-out of multiple sets of textbooks for the competency-based curriculum has technically put an end to the textbook monopoly. Still, further thinking shifts in developing and using learning materials are critically needed to stimulate the circulation of innovative ideas beyond the deep-seated mainstream doctrines.

4.2 Teacher Professionalization and Professionalism Development

As presented above, Vietnam has focused on teacher professionalization and teacher professionalism to standardize the teaching force. In this respect, the governance and control of teacher education and professional development are most evident in the entry requirements into the teaching profession and the application of standards for in-service teachers.

4.2.1 Teacher Professionalization. The enforcement of professional standards for teachers, on the one hand, is aimed at improving the teaching force’s quality. On the other hand, it is to inform the evaluation of the needs for teachers’ and school leaders’ professional development. The 2018 Professional Standards for teachers, replacing the 2009 version, include higher requirements. The standards for pre-service teacher education have been increased accordingly. As of 2019, almost 100 per cent of teachers met the standards according to the Education Law 2005 and the revised one in 2009. Nevertheless, the increased

standards for pre-service teacher education by the Education Law 2019 have led to a large number of teachers who do not meet the new teacher standards (VNIES 2021).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned aims, the application of professional standards has been criticized for heavily emphasizing qualification attainment rather than actual performance. There is confusion about MOET's procedure for collecting teachers' evaluation data, which teachers are supposed to fulfil and is seen as a redundancy. For example, this reality is reflected by a lower secondary teacher whose opinion is stated in the national press:

Only teachers who received formal training, graduated from teacher education universities and colleges, passed the official recruitment exam, can stand on the podium, and they are evaluated every year, so there is no need for a standard evaluation which is very formalistic like the way it is being done. Hopefully, MOET will reconsider whether it is necessary to use the professional standards to evaluate teachers. Reducing administrative procedures or reducing records and unnecessary pressure is also one of the solutions for improving the quality of teaching substantially (Nguyen 2021).

From the teachers' perspective, self-evaluation against the professional standards on a yearly basis involved a large amount of bureaucratic paperwork. As a result, the repetition of the evaluation processes renders the enforcement of the current standards excessive.

While the qualification standards are a form of licensure statute, the professional standards for teachers serve broader aims. The latter provides the basis for teacher self-evaluation and teacher appraisal. Furthermore, it informs both the governmental administration bodies and teacher education institutions about teacher professional development needs, which is significant for improving the teacher policies (MOET 2018b).

4.2.2 Teacher Professionalism. In an attempt to develop teacher professionalism, MOET set out a strategy to revamp teacher education and professional development in accordance with the new requirements of the comprehensive education reform. Specifically, the multidimensional strategy aims to strengthen the existing system by: (a) providing pre-service teacher education for new teachers, (b) upgrading those who need additional qualifications, (c) providing in-service training programmes that bring teachers to training centres for specific objectives, and (d) providing support and training for teachers and school leaders inside schools and classrooms through continuing professional development (with the support of the World Bank through ETEP—the Enhancing Teacher Education Program 2016–22) (World Bank 2016; VNIES 2021).

Some important insights are emerging from our review of national and institutional regulations on standards for pre-service teacher education programmes.² First, a strong emphasis is placed on the teacher's knowledge, skills and professional ethics required for a tightly controlled school curriculum. Yet the expectation that pre-service teacher education should produce newly qualified teachers who are to meet the requirements of schools and society remains vague or over-generic. Second, although teachers are expected to have more autonomy, exemplify critical and creative thinking and be actively involved in knowledge construction, they are at the same time demanded to “have patriotism and a love for socialism, understand and strictly comply with the Communist Party of Vietnam's strategies and undertakings, the State's policies and laws” (MOET 2009). In other words, the ultimate requirement is that a teacher should be an obedient servant of the authorities or dutifully comply with the top-down mandates. Third, pre-service teacher education is not inclusive of some key areas of pedagogical knowledge and skills, including pupil behaviour management and teaching pupils with special education needs and disabilities, pedagogies that have grown in importance in initial teacher education in many countries around the world. These requirements for teachers' capacities are also absent from the latest professional standards for

teachers. Meanwhile, other areas of teacher professionalism, such as classroom behaviour management, application of pedagogical research into teaching, and professional responsibilities towards colleagues, parents and the wider community, are surprisingly not included or not expressed explicitly in the teachers' standards.

These findings suggest that there is a gap in Vietnamese policymakers' and teacher education providers' approaches to teacher professionalism and standards. While the development of teacher standards has shaped the definition of a qualified teacher, the current official approach to quality in education might lead to the need for the redefinition of a highly qualified teacher. Such a knowledge gap might therefore have a negative impact on the enactment process of the standardization policy.

4.3 Standards-Based Quality Management in Schools

Vietnam has increasingly emphasized school accreditation over the past several years by introducing a series of regulations around national standards for schools (see MOET 2018a). Despite increased attention to improving schools' standards, implementing standards-based quality management in Vietnam still encounters some limitations and difficulties. With regard to the policymaking and the practice of quality assurance, for example, there is a critical need for a more independent mechanism of accreditation, in addition to developing professional quality assurance staff, quality culture and internal quality assurance (Nguyen and Hall 2017). More importantly, effective quality management requires a coherent policy stemming from the institution's mission and vision. Middlehurst (1997) argues that external and internal changes require educational institutions, and the system as a whole, to redefine missions, purposes and practice. Quality at schools, therefore, cannot be successfully managed without a clear internal policy decided by those with leadership responsibilities.

Meanwhile, empirical evidence indicates that Vietnamese school leadership has limited autonomy in terms of staff appointment and financial planning, and that they are under close supervision. Specifically, school leaders have considerable in-school power in Vietnamese schools, but there are distinct limits to their autonomy and decision-making. Vietnamese school leaders ensure high accountability, but they are accountable to the political authority, particularly the local People's Committee and the school's own political board, in which the representatives of the Communist Party as members have a significant influence (London 2021; McAleavy et al. 2018).

Efforts to manage standards-based quality, in which quality assurance and accreditation are used as mechanisms for accountability, also lead to a major challenge for Vietnamese schools—creating a school-wide quality culture to enhance quality sustainably. Evidence from the investigation by McAleavy et al. (2018) into the Vietnamese school system confirms that “while there is a role for external accountability, internal accountability systems are also important, including peer review”. While Vietnam's educational landscape is characterized by a high level of public engagement in educational issues (London 2021), there should be more active involvement of frontline actors such as school leaders, teachers, and academics in the decision-making and setting of policies and responsibilities. Such involvement also helps mitigate unintended consequences and limitations of top-down approaches to quality management. Increasing school staff's knowledge of educational plans, strategies and objectives, alongside fostering their active role in sharing knowledge of good practices and problems in their work, allow quality culture to be nurtured. Additionally, empowering teachers, administrative staff, and students to make decisions and address problems appropriate to their levels requires a bottom-up approach to quality culture development (Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, and Pieris 2007; Bendermacher et al. 2016).

Finally, to harness the power of multiple stakeholders, community involvement in schools should also be considered. Although many schools have received significant financial support from parents and local communities through the “societalization” (or socialization) policy (see Duong 2015; London 2021),

parents- or community-school partnerships should operate in a more transparent and organized manner. For example, community members and parents may assist teachers with learning activities at school or be involved in the governance of the school (McAleavy et al. 2018). In this way, community and parental involvement can also act as an accountability mechanism that meaningfully enhances schools' quality management.

5. Conclusion and Implications

As of this writing, Vietnam has introduced the standardization policy for approximately ten years. The enactment of this policy has involved considerable changes and developments in the national curriculum, the teaching force and school management. Nevertheless, to our best knowledge, there has not been a rigorous and comprehensive plan for evaluating the new curriculum or the educational reform more broadly. It may be too early to measure the full impact of the standardization policy on quality improvement in Vietnam's basic education; but it is critical to perform continuous review and reflection on the process of implementing the policy. Based on the insights into the development and enactment of Vietnam's standardization policy presented above, we offer implications for educational policy and practice, particularly in countries that pursue the competency-based curriculum and standardization approach to enhancing the quality of basic education.

First, the adoption of CBE needs to be informed by a profound understanding of the foundational components and principles of a CBE system. Many scholars suggest that competencies and assessments are essential components of any successful CBE (Finn and Finn III 2021; Halász and Michel 2011). Thus, curriculum developers at the central and institutional levels need to reconsider the formulation of learning outcome standards in association with the clarification of competencies, and importantly, the strategies to assess students' competencies. The practicalities of implementing the standardization policy in Vietnam also imply the need for a consistent understanding of new constructs related to quality and standards in education, and how they should be re-contextualized to fit into the local education system's goals and needs.

Second, transitioning from a traditional system to a CBE system requires appropriate resources for a learning environment where flexible approaches to curriculum and assessment are encouraged. It is essential to establish a standards-referenced data system based on comprehensive student assessment. This is a necessary condition for effective competency-based curriculum implementation. The standards-referenced approach to assessment provides specific descriptions of levels of learning and evidence of how well individual students achieve the competency standards (see, for example, standards-referenced assessment in Australia in Killen 2014). An equally important matter is the need for regulatory freedom in a CBE system. Such freedom space allows innovative teaching approaches, as well as scheduling and staffing configurations that best meet students' individual needs (ExcelinEd 2016). The curriculum delivery is unlikely to be successful if Vietnamese schools remain age-based classrooms because such a traditional structure does not basically accommodate pace-based learning.

Finally, standards-based school quality management in Vietnam is young as it is currently confined to the accreditation system, which has been introduced in primary schools. It is clear that the Vietnamese government has a purposeful policy for quality improvement through standardization. Yet quality management processes such as quality assurance and accreditation should be based on a coherent internal policy, coupled with a well-developed cultural and psychological component of its quality culture (Kleijnen et al. 2014). Given quality culture is a kind of organizational culture, leaders are central drivers of quality culture development (Bendermacher et al. 2016). With the capacity to influence resource allocation and optimize people and process management, school leadership could be a prerequisite for actually steering and improving the quality of school education.

NOTES

1. For example, see a detailed discussion in London (2021).
2. Our review focused on the 2009 and 2018 Circulars on Professional Standards for Teachers and documents published online on the webpages of three leading teacher education institutions in Vietnam, i.e., Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Hanoi University of Education, and Thai Nguyen University of Education.

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