

Education for All in Vietnam: high enrolment, but problems of quality remain

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam recognises the need to improve both access to education and quality. It has adopted the Dakar Education for All (EFA) Framework for Action – an initiative with greater focus on quality than those set out in the Millennium Development Goals. Vietnam's National EFA Action Plan sets out a pathway to advance key components of the education system by 2015: early childhood care and pre-school, primary, lower-secondary and non-formal education. The Young Lives project – a long-term study tracking the well-being of 3,000 children in Vietnam and three other countries, over a period of 15 years – has identified challenges in improving education quality and ensuring equity. Young Lives highlights the importance of addressing the needs of children from rural areas, from ethnic minorities, those living with disabilities and those with poor nutrition. Enrolment is rising faster than quality. Without corrective action, many poor children are likely to leave primary school with inadequate numeracy or literacy skills.

Vietnam has a strong political commitment to EFA. Quality of education is one of the country's key education objectives – alongside universal education up to lower secondary level, access to life-long learning, community participation and improved resource management. Vietnam has developed a rigorous programme to support disadvantaged children through, for example, building new schools, abolishing primary school fees and making textbooks available without charge for poor children in highland areas. Education expenditure as a share of total government spending is set to rise from 15 per cent in the late 1990s to 20 per cent by 2015. Public expenditure reforms hold education officials to account for progress towards achieving minimum standards of service quality. Decentralisation is in its infancy, but is creating opportunities for local educational planners to set context-appropriate priorities. Donors support the pro-poor objectives set out in Vietnam's 2006-10 Socio-Economic Development Plan and have increased support from \$2.8 billion in 2004 to \$4.4bn in 2007. Official figures show that some 90 per cent of teachers meet national standards.

However, enormous challenges remain. They include:

- low basic skills acquisition
- a narrow focus on scholastic achievement by teachers who have been trained using traditional teaching methods which fail to encourage interactive learning
- over-reliance on private tuition
- under-investment in education 'software' – curricula, teacher training, classroom resources and educational materials
- limited early child development (ECD) coverage
- unequal access to education for poor, disabled and ethnic minority children
- children failing to perform well due to inadequate nutrition.

POOR OUTCOMES

Young Lives analysed data from basic literacy and numeracy tests taken by a sample of 1,000 eight-year-old children from five Vietnamese provinces. Researchers found that 88 per cent could read a basic sentence, 75 per cent could write a basic sentence without errors or difficulties and 86 per cent could successfully answer a simple numeracy test. There was significant variation by location. Rural children performed worse than urban children in all three tests – 95 per cent, 85 per cent and 92 per cent of urban children could successfully answer the reading, writing, and numeracy tests compared with 86 per cent, 72 per cent and 84 per cent of rural children.

These variations were even more marked between socio-economic groups. They confirmed evidence from a 2002 World Bank study (quoted in Tran *et al*, 2003) that under half of the 'poorest' children were able to write at the level expected for their age. Enrolment rates may be high, but it is clear the quality of primary education, particularly in poor areas, is unsatisfactory. Without remedial action, a large group of children appear likely to leave primary school without adequate numeracy or literacy skills.

There is a significant difference between *Kinh* (the Vietnamese-speaking ethnic majority) and non-*Kinh* children, particularly in literacy skills. *Kinh* children are three times more likely to read Vietnamese with accuracy. All school reading materials are in Vietnamese. Ethnic minority children are unable to access education in their mother tongue and often fail to develop fluency in Vietnamese.

NARROW FOCUS ON SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT

Vietnam's increasing obsession with 'good performers' contributes to neglect of the overall quality of government services. Authorities in communes – the lowest tier of the government structure – are competing to set up as many model schools or classes as possible. Little attention is being paid to improving teaching methods or the learning environment, as teachers compete to 'produce' high numbers of excellent students. Excellence is being pursued through studying old exam papers rather than by developing innovative teaching and learning methods to develop children's creative and intellectual abilities.

Emphasis on high-level achievement stems from a traditional top-down planning approach. The national government often sets targets which have to be carried out by lower tiers of government, regardless of financial or human resource capacity gaps. Reforming the planning process is crucial to ensuring that feasible and sustainable targets are set which are in children's best interests.

OVER-RELIANCE ON PRIVATE TUITION

An increasing number of Vietnamese children attend private classes. Young Lives found that almost half of the children sampled have a private tutor and that there are major variations in access to private tuition. Children in lowland areas of Vietnam are at least eight times more likely to receive private tuition than children from highland areas. Children from non-poor families are four times more likely to take extra classes than very poor children. Most dramatically, there was a marked difference between *Kinh* and non-*Kinh* children (2.6 per cent versus 49.7 per cent).

Over 60 per cent of children receiving private tuition had been prompted to take extra classes by parents or other close relatives, with another 20 per cent persuaded by their teachers. Fewer than ten per cent of children attending extra classes for academic subjects believed that extra classes were necessary. Interviews with those children taking extra classes in arts and sport found that 17 per cent had made the decision themselves.

Young Lives researchers found that extra classes did not significantly increase eight-year-old children's writing and multiplication abilities. Children's psycho-social well-being and household wealth – and not extra classes – are what significantly determine academic success. Young Lives measured well-being using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire 25 test (SDQ 25) – an internationally standardised measure of children's mental health – and found that children with low psycho-social well-being scores are 42 - 58 per cent less likely to perform literacy and numeracy tasks correctly. Household wealth also has a significant impact on reading and numeracy skills, with children from wealthier families more likely to read and multiply correctly. Children taking extra classes after school are more than twice as likely to be able to read correctly as non-participant children, but it is their relative wealth, and not participation in private tuition, which gives them this advantage.

UNDER-INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

Analysis of education expenditure confirms continued prioritisation of investment in infrastructure rather than in innovative child-friendly methodologies to foster children's cognitive, emotional and social abilities. While public investment in education as a share of total public expenditure increased modestly between 1999 and 2002 (from 15.6 to 16.9 per cent) 73 per cent was spent on recurrent costs such as teachers' salaries and building maintenance, and the remaining portion on administration. Such recurrent costs are, of course, critical to maintain teacher motivation and to attract sufficiently qualified personnel. However, a worryingly low proportion was allocated to developing teaching methods and an interactive learning environment.

LIMITED EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT COVERAGE

ECD programmes are still scarce, leaving a large proportion of children inadequately prepared to enter primary school. In 2004, the total number of urban children with access to ECD services was about 65 per cent and that of rural children 36 per cent. Only three per cent of ECD classrooms meet Vietnam's national standard – a minimum 48m² able to accommodate between 20 and 35 children. Hardly any ECD schools employ quality teaching methods in a child-friendly learning environment.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

High primary enrolment rates do not guarantee equal opportunities. Children with disabilities and from the poor and ethnic minorities are the most disadvantaged. According to official statistics, there are about three million children with disabilities. UNICEF estimates that one-in-three never go to school. There are also regional differences: Young Lives found that while all eight-year-old children sampled had attended formal school in the deltas of the Red and Mekong Rivers and in the central coastal areas, five per cent of children in the highlands of northern Vietnam had never received any schooling.

A new Education Law approved by Vietnam's parliament in September 2005 provides for a uniform national curriculum, but does not acknowledge children's different life experiences, language abilities and local contexts. Ethnic minority children are disadvantaged and denied access to bilingual education. When we disaggregated the analysis by *Kinh* and ethnic minority children across the five provinces in which Young Lives is tracking the progress of children, we found nine per cent of non-*Kinh* children of school age not being educated. Young Lives found that 92 per cent of children in the poorest category had attended school, whereas children from wealthier households were almost universally enrolled. National enrolment data indicates that wealth-based disparities of access are not restricted to primary education, but are even more pronounced at secondary level. In 2002, while 85.8 per cent of children in the better-off quintile attended lower secondary school, only 53.8 per cent in the poorest quintile did so.

The costs involved in sending children to school – and the opportunities which poor families lose by doing so – make it difficult for poor children to regularly attend or to complete the whole academic year. This is particularly the case at the higher secondary school level for children in the poorer quintiles. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) found that for many poor households, children's labour is much more valuable than school attendance. The long-term benefit of education is not perceived as outweighing short-term economic losses.

NUTRITION AND EDUCATION

Young Lives researchers found that 80 per cent of children with low height-for-age scores passed the numeracy test, compared to 89 per cent of children with high height-for-age scores. Seventy-four per cent of children with low height-for-age scores were able to read a sentence correctly, compared to 96 per cent of their better-nourished counterparts. When it comes to writing, test results showed a marked disparity: 57 per cent of children with low height-for-age-scores could write without difficulty, compared to 92 per cent of better-nourished children.

In ultra-poor areas, where children do not have enough to eat, school feeding programmes are needed to make sure that no children go to school hungry. There is considerable international evidence of a strong correlation between additional food provision and educational achievement. School feeding programmes allow marginalised children to enrol and to stay in school during times of hunger. Meeting EFA goals will require policies to address the nutritional needs of stunted Vietnamese children.

LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Quality pre-primary education prepares children for the transition to primary education. ECD services may increase school enrolment and achievement. Studies from Brazil, Colombia and Argentina show substantial differences in progress through primary school between children who take part in ECD programmes and those who do not. In the Indian state of Haryana, a study found that subsequent drop-out rates for children from middle and lower castes who had attended ECD classes were dramatically lower. When ECD programmes include parental training, parents are more likely to go on to engage with teachers and schools throughout their child's education. Access to ECD allows older siblings (particularly girls) to attend school when they otherwise might have to take care of younger siblings.
- Language barriers to learning faced by ethnic minority children can be overcome. Studies from Africa and Latin America show that bilingual schooling can reduce exclusion of indigenous and ethnic minority children.
- Some international evaluations of targeted exemptions from user fees have raised concerns about high administrative costs and corruption and favouritism when exemptions are granted at the discretion of local service providers. The poor may be unaware of exemption schemes and/or not apply for fear of being stigmatised. However, there are more positive experiences. In its first five years, a scheme in Bangladesh led to an increase of female secondary school enrolment from 27 to 44 per cent. *Progresas*, Mexico's conditional cash transfer programme, has demonstrated how targeted exemption programmes – based on strategic targeting of beneficiary households – can help reduce childhood poverty.
- Child-sensitive pro-poor budget monitoring (CBM) is being pioneered by South Africa's Institute for Democracy, by UNICEF Latin America and by Save the Children UK (SCUK) in parts of South Asia and Africa. It can help to verify whether policy commitments to EFA are being adequately funded at national, provincial and local levels. In Vietnam, Save the Children Sweden and Young Lives are piloting CBM models with commune and provincial partners. As the Ministry of Finance has encouraged monitoring of budget transparency, there is scope for fostering government-civil society partnerships to ensure that budget allocations are more child-sensitive.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Vietnam is yet to consistently provide a child-friendly education – defined by UNICEF as:

- a quality environment that does not exclude, discriminate or stereotype on the basis of difference

- schools that are affordable, accessible and which acknowledge children's diverse needs
- an effective-learning environment employing quality teaching methods
- a healthy environment that is protective of children, teaches life-skills and protects children from abuse and harm
- a gender-sensitive environment in which families, communities and children are engaged in school management decisions.

School children should not simply be regarded as passive recipients of education services, but as actors with important insights into how the curriculum could be made more relevant to their lives in a rapidly changing Vietnam. Young Lives research findings suggest that it would be advisable for Vietnamese policy-makers and donors to:

- invest more in ECD – particularly for rural, poor and ethnic minority children – and to support research to evaluate ECD impact and progress on overcoming gender-, ethnic- and income-based disparities
- improve education quality for poor rural and highland communities and develop context-specific solutions to reduce achievement gaps
- recognise that while the concept of 'socialisation' of basic services – a term used in Vietnam to refer to the introduction of user fees based on the ability to pay – has merits in mobilising local funds, there is a risk that achievement gaps could widen if the poor cannot afford services. To avert this danger, the very poor should be fully exempted
- train teachers to use interactive learning methods in a child-friendly learning environment
- increase contact hours and encourage all-day schooling to reduce incentives for private tuition. This will not be immediately achievable in minority areas where schools and trained teachers are in short supply, but more effort could be made to make the best use of the limited time children spend at school
- provide teachers with incentives to work in highland areas
- improve in-service training and supervision
- build on the strengths of the community boarding school programme – a model of self-financed community-based schooling that aims to encourage children from highland communes to study and stay in school overnight. Much effort is needed to tackle issues of protection, security and discrimination
- reform student assessment methods, since the current system measures success on the basis of completion of a particular grade but fails to measure students' capacity. More appropriate assessment methods could identify a child's problems in a timely manner allowing for pragmatic adjustment
- acknowledge the value of family and community participation in school management, curriculum design and budgeting
- promote CBM as a tool to monitor whether a greater share of the education cake is used for teacher training
- promote an environment and curricula encouraging creativity, rather than learning by rote.

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Young Lives is an innovative long-term study of childhood poverty being carried out in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam. The main goals are to:

- provide good quality quantitative and qualitative information about the lives of children living in poverty
- better understand the intergenerational transmission of poverty
- trace linkages between key policy changes and children's well-being
- promote effective and sustainable pro-poor and pro-child policies.

Young Lives is using a multi-method approach to trace the lives of 12,000 children, made up of a 'younger cohort' and an 'older cohort', over a 15-year period. In each of the study countries, 2,000 children who were around the age of one in 2002, an older group of 1,000 children around the age of eight in 2002 and their primary caregivers are being surveyed every three to four years. Ongoing policy analyses and interviews with key community leaders paint a picture of the diverse contexts in which the children are growing-up and how their households and communities change over time. Qualitative sub-studies will complement the data gathered through the survey approach and will study in greater depth some of the key Young Lives themes; the relationship between poverty and:

- children's time use
- children's well-being
- children's access to such key services as education and health at transitional periods in their lives.

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Young Lives project, DFID or the partner institutions.

For further information and to download Young Lives publications, visit the project's website at **www.younglives.org.uk** at email younglives@younglives.org.uk



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