

Education and Politics in Wartime

School Systems in North and South Vietnam,
1965–1975

❖ Olga Dror

The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting.
Plutarch, “On Listening”

It is important not merely that each citizen learn the standardized, centralized, and literate idiom in his primary school, but also that he should forget or at least devalue the dialect which is not taught in school. Both memory and forgetfulness have deep social roots; neither springs from historical accident.

Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics*

On 2 September 1945, at Ba Đình Square in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as a sovereign state independent of French colonial rule. France refused to recognize the new state and instead went to war. In 1954, after the French lost their final battle at Dien Bien Phu, an international agreement divided the country. The North, with Ho Chi Minh at its helm, proclaimed the DRV as a Communist state. In the South, anti-Communists led by Ngo Dinh Diem founded the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) at Saigon. Almost one million Northerners fled their homes to resettle in the South.

From the late 1950s until 1975, the war between North and South Vietnam evolved to become one of the most prolonged and tragic confrontations of the Cold War. Vietnamese were caught in the global conflict between the Communist camp(s) headed by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the anti-Communist world led by the United States. Unlike the Cold War between the camps of the superpowers, the war between the DRV and the RVN was an armed conflict between two polities identifying themselves as representing the same national ethnicity: Vietnamese. The two

Journal of Cold War Studies

Vol. 20, No. 3, Summer 2018, pp. 57–113, doi:10.1162/jcws_a_00819

© 2018 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

states put this unifying identification aside and fought for the ideologies that set them apart. In the 20-year-long struggle from 1955 to 1975, in addition to the loyalty of their foreign allies, the fates of the DRV and the RVN were tied to their success in producing new generations that would subscribe to their respective agendas. This was done through many venues, of which education was one of the most important.

Relying on archival materials and published documents, this article compares the educational systems at the primary and secondary school levels in the DRV and the RVN, with a special focus on the wartime period of 1965 to 1975.¹ It considers their respective “divorces” from the French colonial educational system and compares their goals, the problems they encountered, and their means for overcoming these problems.

Schools in North and South Vietnam were shaped by social and political transformations. In the DRV, schools were the space for raising and mobilizing new citizens willing to build socialism and to fight and die for the goals of the ruling party and the government. The DRV maintained two other educational systems with the same goal. One was a complex of Vietnamese schools in the territory of the PRC. The other was an educational network in the territory of the RVN. Both offer a unique opportunity to consider the DRV’s relationship with the PRC and the DRV’s role in what was claimed to be a grassroots organization of the Communists and their supporters in the RVN, the National Liberation Front, commonly referred to as the Viet Cong (or Vietnamese Communists) in the RVN and in the United States.

Unlike the uniform educational system in the North, the South’s educational system was diverse, reflecting the diversity of the population and allowing, compared with the North, a relative but significant freedom to express this diversity. Moreover, the educational policy in the RVN did not aim to indoctrinate students and instead, for a variety of reasons, strove to provide

1. The only Western study that compares the educational systems in the DRV and RVN prior to this period is a doctoral dissertation by Thaveeporn Vasavakul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam: A Comparative Study of State Apparatus, State Policy, and State Power (1945–1965),” 2 vols., Ph.D. Diss., Cornell University, 1994. On the RVN, also see Matthew B. Masur, “Hearts and Minds: Cultural Nation-Building in South Vietnam, 1954–1963,” Ph.D. Diss., Ohio State University, 2004. On French education from 1945 to 1975, see Nguyen Thuy Phuong, *L'école française au Vietnam de 1945 à 1975: De la mission civilisatrice à la diplomatie culturelle* (Amien: Encrage, 2017). On Chinese education in Cho Lon, see Mei Feng Mok, “Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn: Nation-building, Community-building and Transnationalism in Everyday Life during the Republic of Việt Nam, 1955–1975,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington (Seattle), 2016. On Chinese schools in Hanoi, see Han Xiaorong, “A Community between Two Nations: The Overseas Chinese Normal School in Hà Nội,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2017), pp. 23–63.

children with a sense of normality by avoiding study and discussion of the war in the school curriculum.

Education under French Colonialism

In December 1942, La Foire Exposition (The Exposition Fair), opened in Saigon with a pavilion dedicated to education in Indochina. Greeting visitors at the entrance was a bas-relief representing “Instruction and Ignorance.” Above the bust of Marshall Philippe Pétain, head of the Vichy government in France, was a large decorative composition titled “la France éducatrice” (France the educator). The exhibition contained a bust of Father Alexander de Rhodes, a Jesuit missionary who in the seventeenth century popularized the Latinized alphabet, which his missionary predecessors had devised to simplify their access to the Vietnamese language. The exhibition lauded the simplicity and utility of the Latinized script, called *quốc ngữ* (national script), in comparison with the “dense tangle” of Chinese characters traditionally used by the Vietnamese, and it praised the role of the French colonial administration for making it the script of education. The exhibition proceeded to demonstrate the structure and success of the educational system that the French had built in Indochina in general and in Vietnam in particular.²

Behind the showy façade lay significant problems. Vietnamese society was traditionally very education-oriented. Despite the difficulties of mastering Chinese characters, the flow of people taking examinations, which would allow them to be appointed to government positions, was relatively large. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, 4,000 to 6,000 people regularly took the triennial regional exams, and in the late-nineteenth century this number continued to be around 6,000 but fell rapidly after France conquered northern Vietnam. In estimating literacy, these numbers must be augmented by the thousands of people who did not advance beyond the regional examinations or who studied but were never admitted to the exams.³

When the French colonized Vietnam, they administratively divided it into the colony of Cochinchina in the south, governed under metropolitan French law, and the protectorates of Tonkin in the north and of Annam in the center. The protectorates were nominally ruled by Vietnamese emperors from

2. “Le pavillon de l’instruction publique à la Foire-exposition de Saigon,” *Bulletin général de l’instruction publique*, No. 8 (April 1943), p. 207.

3. K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 206–210, 227, 485.

the city of Huế and were governed by Vietnamese mandarins under close French supervision. In Cochinchina, which was the first place to fall under French rule in the 1860s, the French authorities developed a dual Franco-indigenous educational system that taught both French and *quốc ngữ*. The first schools where the Vietnamese alphabet was used appeared in Saigon and its vicinity in 1864.⁴ In Tonkin and Annam, the French established an educational system 30–40 years later in which Vietnamese were initially allowed to keep traditional schools teaching in Chinese characters as long as these schools refrained from politics. Initial attempts to introduce *quốc ngữ* were not universally successful because some teachers were reluctant to abandon their classical training in favor of the alphabet.⁵ Learning only the alphabet cut pupils off from their heritage and the precolonial texts that were in the character system of writing. Pupils had access to them only when they were translated or transliterated into the alphabet. As a result, two indigenous systems came into being: one that relied on character writing and one that relied on *quốc ngữ*. Only the people who were educated in the latter system could hope for employment in the colonial system. As Gail Kelly, a scholar of colonial education, has pointed out, the French “spent much time and money standardizing the writing system and developing a literature as well as textbooks.” The French wanted to divert pupils from the traditional character-based schooling, which they considered to be the bedrock of nationalism. *Quốc ngữ* gave easier access to education, separated pupils from their heritage, and propagated ideas the French wanted to spread among the Vietnamese.⁶ In 1936, the French colonial system obtained an ally in spreading *quốc ngữ* when the Indochinese Communist Party established an association for spreading the alphabet among adults. Both colonial authorities and those who opposed them found the alphabet to be a useful instrument for spreading their respective agendas.⁷

4. Pascale Bezançon, *Un enseignement colonial: L'expérience française en Indochine (1860–1945)*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1997), Vol. 1, p. 60.

5. On education during colonial times, see Gail P. Kelly, *Franco-Vietnamese Schools, 1918–1938: Regional Development and Implications for National Integration* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); David H. Kelly, ed., *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press, 2000); Trinh Van Thao, *L'école française en Indochine* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1995); Bezançon, *Un enseignement colonial*; and Pascale Bezançon, *Une colonisation éducatrice: L'expérience indochinoise, 1860–1945* (Paris: Harmattan, 2002).

6. Gail P. Kelly, “Colonialism, Indigenous Society, and School Practices: French West Africa and Indochina,” in Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly, eds., *Education and the Colonial Experience* (London: Transaction Books, 1978), p. 13.

7. Hoang Tu Dong, “L'enseignement complémentaire pour adultes,” *Études vietnamiennes*, No. 30 (1971), p. 24.

The creation of the colonial educational system was complicated by the different statuses of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina vis-à-vis the metropole, as well as by differences in local cultures and societies in the three regions, including class stratifications. Further social stratification was caused by the arrival of the French *colons* (settlers) and by the appearance of mixed families. In 1905, in an attempt to reign in the diverse tendencies in educational systems, the Direction Générale de l'Instruction Publique was established to take the administration of education away from the different regions of Indochina and to centralize control from Hanoi.⁸ But this had little effect, and the Indochinese educational system continued to be chaotic.

In 1917, Governor General Albert Sarraut attempted to centralize all educational services not only in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina but also in the two other countries of Indochina: Laos and Cambodia. His goal was to create a unified educational system based on the Franco-indigenous, later called Franco-Vietnamese, schools that already existed in Cochinchina. All other schools were declared private, even though they had to follow the curriculum of the Franco-Vietnamese schools. Only schools that served *colons* were under the control of the Ministry of Education in France. The situation resulted in a significant diversity of schools that varied in quality as well as in approaches to teaching. What hardly changed was the heavy emphasis on examinations. This emphasis had existed in Vietnam from pre-modern times but was not alleviated with the establishment of the colonial system.

The colonial educational system did not create a cohesive society and instead exacerbated tensions that existed in precolonial Vietnamese society with further stratification and division, which served the French strategy of “divide and rule.” School enrolment was exceptionally low. In 1940, the year with the highest school enrolment in colonial Vietnam, 576,650 pupils were enrolled.⁹ Nevertheless, more people were exposed to basic education, and the introduction of the alphabet significantly shortened the time needed to gain literacy. The colonial system of education became a breeding ground of nationalist activities, and many revolutionary leaders emerged from it.

Three points can be gained from this brief look at education in French Indochina. First, the relatively meager results of French educational policies in

8. Bezançon, *Un enseignement colonial*, Vol. 1, p. 103.

9. Service de la statistique générale, *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine, 1939–1940* [ASDLI] (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1942), Tables II, III, V, VII, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, pp. 28–31, 35–37; and *ASDLI, 1947–1948* (Hanoi: Statistique Générale de l'Indochine, 1949), Tables 41–44, 46–50, pp. 61–64, 68–71. Võ Thuần Nho gives the number of pupils in 1945–1946 as 286,692, with 284,314 in primary schools and 2,378 secondary schools. Võ Thuần Nho, *35 năm phát triển sự nghiệp giáo dục phổ thông* (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1980), p. 213.

Indochina show the common starting point from which the DRV and RVN moved rapidly to build their educational systems. Second, colonial education damaged the connection of Vietnamese with traditional culture by forcibly promoting alphabetic writing, and this meant that all postcolonial education would continue on that basis. Third, colonial education produced people willing to challenge authority—, a tendency that continued in the RVN but was forcibly stamped out in the DRV.

Education in the DRV

The Ministry of Education was established in Hanoi immediately after the proclamation of independence on 2 September 1945. The first two education ministers served only briefly. Vũ Đình Hoè, a lawyer and one of the founders in 1944 of the Democratic Party of Vietnam, a satellite of the Communist Party, served from September 1945 to March 1946, when he was replaced by Đặng Thai Mai, a writer and literary critic. Đặng Thai Mai's tenure lasted for eight months, after which he was assigned to a series of lower positions. In 1959, he became head of the Institute of Literature, making him one of the leading figures in shaping the literary landscape of the DRV.

In November 1946, a historian, anthropologist, and educator named Nguyễn Văn Huyên was installed as the DRV's minister of education. He remained in that post until his death in October 1975. In 1965, a separate ministry was created to administer secondary, technical, and higher education. Its first minister, Tạ Quang Bửu, an educator, military engineer, and one-time minister of defense, was at the helm of the newly formed ministry from its inception until 1976. The long terms in office of these two officials helped to ensure a consistent policy for the North Vietnamese educational system.

Erasing the French System

In February 1950 the DRV launched its first educational reform, stipulating that theory and practice were to go hand-in-hand and that education was an instrument of a social class, so there could be no neutral education outside politics. In the framework of this class orientation, the educational system was to be based on the principles of nation, science, and the masses.¹⁰ The old

10. Võ Thuần Nho, *35 năm phát triển*, p. 43.

system of the twelve-year elementary and secondary education was replaced by a system of nine-year general education divided into three levels: four years at the first level or elementary school, three years at the second level or middle school, and two years at the third level or high school. The new system also changed the curriculum, replacing French pedagogy with the agenda of the new regime. This reform was of limited scope and was carried out only in the zones under Viet Minh control. The French-occupied zone continued the educational system as before.¹¹ Moreover, in 1951–1953, the major part of the DRV educational establishment moved to the PRC, where it stayed until the end of the war against the French and the division of the country.

In the North, the dual French system of private and public schools ceased to exist when private schools were abolished in 1954.¹² The only exceptions were some Chinese schools for Chinese resident aliens and Chinese born in Vietnam, of whom there were roughly 175,000 in the DRV in 1960.¹³ The Chinese schools were traditionally strong in Vietnam. They were supported by the Chinese overseas community and, after 1950, by the government of the PRC.¹⁴ By 1965, these schools were free of charge, were integrated into the DRV educational system, and accepted some Vietnamese students of non-Chinese origin.¹⁵

In March 1956, the Educational Congress met and launched the second—and last before the end of the war—DRV educational reform. The reform introduced a new structure with ten consecutive years of general education, as was the case in the Soviet Union. Children were to start elementary school between the ages of six and seven.¹⁶ In reality, many children started much later. In 1956, an age bracket was established for each grade as follows:

11. Pham Minh Hac, “Educational Reforms,” in Pham Minh Hac, ed., *Education in Vietnam, 1945–1991* (Hanoi: Ministry of Education and Training of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1991), p. 30.

12. Nguyen Van Huyen, “L’enseignement ggénéral en R.D.V.N.,” *Études vietnamiennes*, No. 30 (1971), p. 9.

13. The number is from Ken Post, *Revolution, Socialism, and Nationalism in Viet Nam*, Vol. 2, (Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1989), p. 80 n. 22.

14. “Nghị định số 94-ND ngày 10-2-1956 quy định về thể lệ, mở trường tư thục hoa kiều,” cited in Vasavakul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam,” Vol. 2, p. 560.

15. Personal exchange with one of the former students, 10 April 2016.

16. Nguyen, “L’enseignement ggénéral,” p. 9; and Nguyen Van Huyen, *Sixteen Years’ Development of National Education in the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 16. Alexander Casella gives the starting age for the elementary school in the North as seven. Alexander Casella, “The Structure of General Education in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” *Studies and Documents*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Geneva: Asian Documentation and Research Center, 1975), p. 6. Nguyen Van Huyen stipulates that preschool programs prepared children from six to seven years of age to attend general-education school and that children could also enter elementary school directly from kindergarten at the age of 6. Nguyen, *Sixteen Years’*, pp. 32, 37.

- Grade one, ages 7 to 11
- Grade two, ages 8 to 12
- Grade three, ages 9 to 13
- Grade four, ages 10 to 14
- Grade five, ages 11 to 15
- Grade six, ages 12 to 16
- Grade seven, ages 13 to 17
- Grade eight, ages 14 to 18
- Grade nine, ages 15 to 19
- Grade ten, ages 16 to 20.¹⁷

In real life, the age difference could be even larger than the brackets suggest. I interviewed many Vietnamese whose classmates were four to six years older than they were.

Upon completion of four years in elementary school, students would take a final examination. Those who passed were promoted to the next level, where they would study for three years and, after passing a final examination, would obtain a certificate of completion of the “second level” (i.e., middle school). To get into the third level, or high school, students had to take an entrance examination. At the end of their third and last year at this level, students would take their last examination in the general education program. If they passed, they could apply to study at a university.¹⁸

In addition to the Chinese minority that resided mainly in the cities, minorities in the DRV also lived in the mountainous areas, comprising as many as 2,385,000 people according to one scholar.¹⁹ During the war against the French, the Viet Minh (a coalition of the anti-French forces under the direction of Communists) relied heavily on minorities, many of whom they won over by a combination of propaganda and coercion.²⁰ When the French forces took over the Red River Delta, Ho Chi Minh’s government became dependent on the (passive or active) support of the minorities. Viet Minh headquarters were located in territory inhabited by minorities, many of whom traditionally hated the Vietnamese. Starting from 1946, Viet Minh authorities sought to

17. “Nghị định số 596-ND ngày 30-8-1956 ban hành quy chế trường phổ thông 10 năm,” cited in Vasavakul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam,” Vol. 2, p. 406.

18. Casella, “The Structure of General Education,” p. 6.

19. Post, *Revolution, Socialism, and Nationalism in Viet Nam*, Vol. 2, p. 80 n. 22.

20. Bernard B. Fall, *The Viet-Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1956); and Ellen Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954), pp. 97–98.

implement a policy of limited self-governance for minorities, a policy further developed after the end of the war in 1954.²¹

In 1960, 294,700 pupils attended the mountainous-area schools, called “Schools for Pupils of the Highlands.” In 1964, the number was reported as 300,000. In 1960, the Ministry of Education reported major achievements, including modernization of the Thai script and the creation of a script for the Mèo minorities, also known as Hmong.²² In reality, the situation remained complicated. The Thai and Mèo minorities were apparently problematic for the government. While the Tày, Nùng, Mường, and several other minorities contributed to the First Indochina War on the side of the Viet Minh and were generally loyal to the party, Thai and Mèo leaders and many Thai and Mèo common people sided with and had acquired arms from the French. Mèo people in western Thanh Hóa Province reacted violently to the government’s implementation of the Land Reform intended to destroy the power of local chiefs and notables who were pivotal figures in the organization of tribal communities.

The standoff was exacerbated by the confiscation of Mèo plots of land by party cadres who were ethnic Vietnamese and by the relocation of ethnic Vietnamese into Mèo areas. Mèo groups continued to hold out at least until the end of the 1960s.²³ On 28 January 1966, the government issued a decree to organize a special office in charge of educating the peoples of the mountainous areas. The office came into being on 14 June 1966, but with only thirteen employees it was understaffed. The staff made some progress on studying the situation in the mountainous areas, however. Their main focus was to produce teaching materials for the Mèo people. Realizing their deficiencies, Vietnamese went to the USSR to study the Soviet experience incorporating a multitude of peoples into the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics.²⁴ The DRV government pursued a similar goal: to co-opt the minorities in their country into the larger Vietnamese society.

21. Larry R. Jackson, “The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (May 1969), esp. pp. 317–319; and Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 112.

22. Nguyen, *Sixteen Years’ Development*, p. 34; and Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, *20 Years’ Development of Education in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (Hanoi: House of the Ministry of Education of the DRV, 1965), p. 44.

23. Post, *Revolution*, Vol. 3, p. 88.

24. “Báo cáo về Vụ Giáo dục miền núi,” July 14, 1971, in Vietnam National Archive Center No. 3, Hanoi (VNA3), Bộ giáo dục (BGD) 855, p. 1.

Education during Wartime

In August 1964, the United States started to bomb North Vietnam. In 1965, with the expansion of bombing and the introduction of U.S. troops into Vietnam, the war intensified, and administering the school system became more complicated. To deal with the bombing, North Vietnam underwent an elaborate process of decentralization, which also affected the educational system. Many pupils were evacuated from the cities to the countryside.²⁵ The issue of pupils' security was important for schools.²⁶ According to Alexander Casella's study published in 1975, schools, which the North Vietnamese claimed were often targeted in bombing campaigns in order to demoralize the population, were broken into class units distributed in different locations over a large area. Teachers would bicycle from one class to another, covering up to fifteen miles a day. In 1973, after the end of U.S. bombing, the system resumed as before.²⁷ Air-raid drills, the building of air-raid shelters, and the organization of air defense teams took up a considerable part of the day in schools that continued to operate during the years of bombing.²⁸

Despite these difficulties, the DRV appears to have made progress in developing its educational system, judging from available statistical data, which nevertheless must be taken with a great deal of skepticism. No censuses were conducted in either the DRV or the RVN from 1945 to 1975. Thus, what we have are estimates that differ from one source to another, sometimes by as much as 15 percent. Also, the school-age population was normally identified as from seven to seventeen years of age in the North and from six to eighteen years of age in the South, so comparisons cannot be precise. Furthermore, many pupils were older than the age designated for their educational level, but no statistics were kept on this. In the South, the students of primary-school age were estimated to be around 16 percent of the population, and those of secondary-school age at 14.5 percent. In the absence of recorded enrollments, I have applied this proportion to the North as well (see Table 1).

During the two decades from 1956 to 1975, school enrollment in the DRV increased 6.5 times. Table 2 shows the number of pupils entering and graduating from each level in 1970–1971. The estimated total population

25. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

26. DRV Ministry of Education, "Báo cáo về phương hướng công tác giáo dục trước tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới," August 1965, p. 8, in VNA3, BGD 683.

27. Casella, "The Structure," p. 4.

28. Harvey Henry Smith et al., *Area Handbook for North Vietnam* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 138.

Table 1. Total Number of Pupils Enrolled in Primary and Secondary Schools

	Total Population/School-Age Population	Number of Primary and Secondary School Pupils
1956	15,879,000/4,843,095	814,500
1962	17,880,000/5,453,400	2,323,860
1965	19,602,000/5,798,610	2,666,728
1968	21,215,000/6,470,575	3,703,200
1973	23,441,000/7,149,505	4,675,727
1975	24,323,000/7,418,515	5,248,055

Sources: Data for 1956 are from Hồ Chí Minh, “Nói chuyện tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc hội liên hiệp thanh niên Việt Nam,” 15 October 1956, in *Hồ Chí Minh, Toàn tập, 1954–1957* (Hanoi: Nxb Sự thật, 1987), p. 530. Nguyễn Khánh Toàn in 1965 gives a lower total number of children in school: 716,085. Toàn, *20 Years’ Development of Education*, pp. 23, 35. For 1961–1962 and 1972, see T. L. [Hồ Chí Minh], “Một thành tích vẻ vang,” *Nhân dân*, 7 September 1961, p. 5. For 1972–1975, see Toàn, *20 Years’ Development of Education*, pp. 167, 191. The materials often do not specify school levels or grades.

Table 2. New Enrollment by Grade and Matriculation Rates in North Vietnam, 1971–1973

Level/Grade	Entrants	Graduates	% of Graduates to Entrants	% of Graduates Continuing to Next Level
1 (1–4)	741,593	496,750	67.0%	80.0%
2 (5–7)	339,317	284,130	71.0%	28.0%
3 (8–10)	62,309	29,125	46.7%	n.a.

Sources: “Báo cáo về kế hoạch 3 năm 1971–1973,” 108/KH, 29 October 1971, in Vietnam National Archive Center No. 3, Hanoi, Bộ giáp dục 833; and *World Population*.

of the DRV in that period was 22,343,000.²⁹ The school-age population (22,343,000 multiplied by 30.5 percent) was thus 6,814,615. However, the total number of pupils during the 1970–1971 school year according to a report of the Ministry of Education was 4,568,829, which is 67.04 percent of calculated school-age youth.³⁰ Table 2 shows enrollments for different grade

29. The average of population estimates is 22,114,000 in 1970 and 22,573,000 in 1971. *World Population: 1975*, p. 116.

30. “Báo cáo về kế hoạch 3 năm 1971–1973,” BGD 108/KH, 29 October 1971, in VNA3, BGD 833.

levels in relation to the total population of the country and the school-age population.

Although the DRV provided access to education for a relatively broad stratum of the population, most of the pupils did not move beyond the first level. If we take the school year of 1970–1971 as a typical year, we can calculate that 53.8 percent of first graders entered the fifth grade, 8.4 percent graduated from the eighth grade, and 3.9 percent finished all ten years of study.

A lack of facilities and teachers imposed significant limitations on the educational system. Most of the schools had classes in shifts, teachers were conscripted into the army, and many of those who remained did not have necessary qualifications. The state did not have sufficient financial means and human resources to expand the system further, but it somehow managed to create a unified system to instill in pupils the values it considered necessary. The expansion of the educational system provided education to more people than in the past and enabled the state to expose more people to its ideological message.

Educational Content

Ho Chi Minh early recognized the importance of raising up youth with a revolutionary spirit. When he was in Guangzhou, in southeastern China, in 1924–1925, a group of children of Vietnamese expatriates in Siam was brought there to be “adopted” by him. They bore his surname, Lý, which was one of his aliases at the time. For these children, Ho Chi Minh envisioned a future closely connected to revolutionary socialism and Communism. In July 1926, he wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Pioneer Organization asking it to accept Vietnamese youths to live and study in the Soviet Union:

Whenever we talk with them about the Russian Revolution, about Lenin, about pioneers—young Leninist fighters—they are very happy and request to visit [their Soviet counterparts], to live with them, to study with them, and to become, like them, genuine young Leninist fighters.³¹

Simultaneously, Ho Chi Minh wrote a letter asking the representative of the French Communist Youth Union in the Youth Communist International to support his request to the Soviet authorities so that his charges could get

31. Nguyễn Ái Quốc, “Gửi Ủy ban trung ương thiếu nhi,” 22 July 1926, in *Hồ Chí Minh, Toàn tập*, Vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Hanoi: Nxb Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật, 2011), pp. 240–241.

“a beautiful Communist education” in the USSR.³² Whether any children were sent to the Soviet Union as a result of these efforts is unclear but seems unlikely.³³

After the establishment of the DRV, Ho Chi Minh’s desire to give youth a Communist upbringing was instituted for the children of the DRV. The Educational Congress in 1956 not only reformed the structure of education but also defined its essence, constructing an apparatus that neatly falls into Louis Althusser’s definition of the pinnacle of a state ideological machine. The school program was to be focused directly on Marxism-Leninism. The political supervision of education meant that “comprehensive educational work must comply with the policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Labor Party of Vietnam”; it also stipulated that schools were to be the instrument of constructing socialism.³⁴ The expectations of educators were clearly announced. In October 1961, the *Nhân dân* (People) newspaper explained that the main point was to follow the party and carry out its purposes and demands. The trickiest part was that, while requiring strict compliance with

32. “Gửi đại diện Đoàn thanh niên cộng sản Pháp tại Quốc tế thanh niên cộng sản,” 22 July 1926, in *Hồ Chí Minh, Toàn tập*, Vol. 2, p. 242.

33. A standard text on the history of the Youth Communist League says that it never happened because of the complex situation in China. Nguyễn Đắc Vinh, Phan Văn Mãi, and Nguyễn Mạnh Dũng, *Lịch sử Đoàn thanh niên cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh và phong trào thanh niên Việt Nam (1925–2012)* (Hanoi: Nxb Thanh niên, 2012), p. 46. On the other hand, in 2005, the newspaper *Nhân dân*—the organ of the Communist Party’s Central Committee—published an article by Evgenii Kobelev on Ho Chi Minh in Russia that claims “there was a good probability” that Moscow agreed to accept those children. See Evgenii Kobelev, “Họ đã chiến đấu bảo vệ Mát-Xcơ-Va,” *Nhân dân* (Hanoi), 6 May 2005. The article provides no proof, however. In 2013, Kobelev became much more assertive, saying without any degree of doubt that the Soviet Pioneer Organization had accepted these children and they had departed for Moscow. Evgenii V. Kobelev, “Ho Shi Min i Rossiya,” in Evgenii V. Kobelev and Vladimir M. Mazyrin, eds., *Rossiisko-Vietnamskie otnosheniya: Sovremennost’ i istoriya: Vzgljad Dvukh Storon* (Moscow: Institut Dal’nego Vostoka, 2013), pp. 325–326. Here, too, he provides no documentation or explanation for the shift in his position. According to the Kobelev articles, three of the Vietnamese children who arrived in the Soviet Union grew up and worked in the Communist International and later, in 1941, participated in the Battle of Moscow, for which they were awarded the Order of the Patriotic War of the First Class in 1986. The Soviet Communist Party’s main newspaper, *Pravda*, published on 14 December 1986 the decree signed by Andrei Gromyko posthumously awarding this distinction to five Vietnamese. Three of the names coincide with names mentioned in connection with sending children to the Soviet Union in 1926. See “Dekret o Nagrazhdenii Gruppy Vietnamskikh Boitsov-Internatsionalistov Ordenom Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voyni Pervoi Stepeni,” *Pravda*, 14 December 1986, p. 2. The three names coinciding with the names of children allegedly sent to the Soviet Union are Lý Thúc Chất (real name: Vương Thúc Thoại), Lý Nam Thân (real name: Nguyễn Sinh Thân), and Lý Anh Tợ (real name: Hoàng Tự). One possibility is that these three people went to the Soviet Union not as children at the end of the 1920s per Kobelev but a decade later in 1938, when they were already in their late twenties. See “Bài ca Trường Nguyễn Văn Trỗi,” *Út Trỗi*, 19 March 2008, <http://utroi.blogspot.com/2008/03/8-thiu-nin-u-tin-ca-bc-h.html>. All of this requires much more research.

34. Võ, *35 năm*, p. 86.

the party's line, the article also demanded creativity from educators.³⁵ In June 1962, the general secretary of the party, Lê Duẩn, made the guidelines for educators clearer, leaving even less room for creativity. Addressing students and professors of the Hanoi Pedagogical Institute, Lê Duẩn affirmed, "As for your profession, I don't understand much in it, but I think that to be teachers is akin to be political workers. To do political work is first of all to propandize people's education to carry out revolution."³⁶

In September 1965, the Ministry of Education defined the goals of the educational system as serving production, serving the national defense, and preparing pupils to fight.³⁷ The educational system was geared to produce a new generation of youth and adolescents to become revolutionary fighters who would continue the revolutionary cause of the party and the nation. "Only then," according to Lê Duẩn, "with good education, will socialism be assured."³⁸

As a result, the school curriculum was highly politicized. Starting from the first level, schools conducted classes in politics, teaching the superiority of socialism and Communism over capitalism and feudalism, which were depicted as hostile to the common people. In addition to the political curriculum, instruction in language, literature, and history heavily stressed the importance of class analysis, love for Communism and for Ho Chi Minh and the party, and hatred for those who opposed their goals.³⁹

The absolute imperative for any pupil was to master the "Five Points," which effectively became the "Five Precepts of Uncle Ho." He first put them forward in the 1940s, and they were modified several times before being solidified into a form that all children could recite by heart for the rest of their lives:

1. Love the Fatherland and compatriots.
2. Study and work well.
3. Maintain good unity and discipline.

35. "Mở rộng và đẩy mạnh cuộc thi đua dạy tốt, học tốt," *Nhân dân*, 19 October 1961.

36. Lê Duẩn, "Càng yêu người bao nhiêu thì càng yêu nghề bấy nhiêu," in Lê Duẩn et al., *Thấu suốt đường lối của Đảng, đưa sự nghiệp giáo dục tiến lên mạnh mẽ vững chắc* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Sự Thật, 1972), p. 7.

37. "Báo cáo về phương hướng công tác giáo dục trước tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới," p. 2.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

39. For more on this, see Olga Dror, "Love, Hatred, and Heroism in Socializing Children in North Vietnam during the War (1965–1975)," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall 2016): 424–449.

4. Maintain hygiene.
5. Be honest, courageous, and modest.⁴⁰

Not only did pupils have to know the precepts by heart, they also had to compete among themselves or emulate one another other in fulfilling the precepts. Winners had the honor of being called “obedient nephews and nieces of Uncle Ho.” This was but one of many emulation or competition movements that mobilized educators and their charges to promote and maintain the state agenda.

Emulation Movements

Vladimir Lenin first wrote about the importance of socialist *sorevnovanie* in December 1918, a year after the Bolsheviks came to power. *Sorevnovanie* is a form of competition among different enterprises and individuals to achieve the highest possible results, which benefits the state and gives recognition to the winners. Although *sorevnovanie* in Russian, as well as its Vietnamese counterpart *thi đua*, means “competition,” in English it has been customary to translate it as “emulation” to reflect the distinction between capitalist competition, in which everyone tries to get ahead of other people, and socialist emulation, in which people strive to imitate and surpass a state-mandated model. The distinction stems from ideology rather than from linguistics. Although not all translations of the Russian word *sorevnovanie* adhere to this, in this article I follow the convention and use the word “emulation.” In Lenin’s opinion, socialism for the first time created the opportunity to employ emulation on a mass scale, another important distinction that is absent from “competition” in its capitalist sense.⁴¹ The movement in the Soviet Union became widespread and survived there until the 1980s.

The DRV borrowed the idea from the Soviet Union. In June 1948, the Viet Minh newspaper *Cứu quốc* (National salvation), in which documents such as the Proclamation of Vietnamese Independence appeared, published Ho Chi Minh’s appeal to the people to participate in the emulation movement: “To emulate is to love the country; if you love the country you must emulate. And those who participate in the emulation [movement] are those who

40. Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi thiếu niên, nhi đồng toàn quốc nhân dịp kỷ niệm 20 năm ngày thành lập Đội thiếu niên tiền phong,” 14 May 1961, in Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn tập*, Vol. 13 (Hanoi: Nxb Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật, 2011), p. 131.

41. V. I. Lenin, “How to Organize Competition?” in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, trans. Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna, Vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 404–15. Sdobnikov and Hanna use the word “competition” and not “emulation.”

love the country the most.”⁴² Emblematically, the first emulation was patriotic emulation (*thi đua yêu nước* or *thi đua ái quốc*) to mobilize Vietnamese for the struggle against the French. In May 1952, the first congress opened for the winners of the emulation movement, who became known as model fighters. This model of using participation in conferences as an award for model fighters was transplanted to other emulation campaigns. The movement helped the DRV achieve a military victory against the French and strengthen Viet Minh credibility around the world.⁴³ By the beginning of the 1960s, the emulation movement had become a staple of DRV reality and a hierarchy of honorific titles was established.⁴⁴

The Third Party Congress, held in early September 1960, was the last party congress before the war ended in 1975. It made important decisions about the development of the country, the most important of which was to launch the First Five-Year Plan, the blueprint for party control over the development of the country for the next five years. The model borrowed the concept of the Five-Year Plan from the Soviet Union. To implement the decisions of the Third Party Congress, new emulation movements were developed.⁴⁵ For example, the *Duyên Hải* (Seashore) emulation movement was among workers in a factory of the same name in Hải Phòng Province; an agricultural emulation movement named Typhoon (*Đại Phong*) originated in Đại Phong hamlet, Quảng Bình Province; and an emulation movement among soldiers was called The Three Firsts, establishing the three main points for the development of the military: training, heroism, and excellence. Many other fields of activity had emulation movements as well.

Education was not to be left out of the system. On 7 September 1961, Ho Chi Minh published in *Nhân dân* an article titled “A Glorious Achievement,” in which he praised the successes of the DRV’s educational system and called for its further improvement. Ho Chi Minh drew the educational system into the orbit of the emulation movement with the campaign of “Two Excellences”

42. Ho Chi Minh first wrote on 1 May 1948 what appears to be a draft of the call and then elaborated on it. The first version has not been made public, but the second became one of the main documents on emulation. Hồ Chí Minh, “Lời kêu gọi thi đua yêu nước,” 1 May 1948, in *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, Vol. 5, pp. 513; and “Lời kêu gọi thi đua ái quốc,” 11 June 1968, *Cứu quốc* (chi nhánh số 6), 24 June 1968.

43. Chiến Hữu, “Thi đua ái quốc,” *Sinh hoạt nội bộ*, No. 8 (May 1948): 6–7, cited in Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam*, trans. by Claire Duiker (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2012), p. 44.

44. For a history of emulation movements in the DRV until 1964, see de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam*.

45. Vasakavul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam,” Vol. 1, pp. 456–516.

(*hai tốt*): “To teach well, to study well.” This implied closely combining theory and practice: education with labor, and culture with revolutionary morals. The goal was to make children into excellent pupils, to make them obedient, and to make them good friends so that in the future they would become “courageous citizens, exemplary cadres, and worthy masters of socialism.”⁴⁶

As the war intensified, the “Two Excellences” emulation shifted its focus. On 2 August 1965, the Office of the Prime Minister issued a directive: “At present when our entire country is in a state of war, the task of ‘opposing Americans to save the country’ is sacred.”⁴⁷ The last time Ho Chi Minh stressed the importance of the “Two Excellences” emulation was in October 1968, less than a year before his death, when his health was drastically declining. Highly praising the successes of emulation, he urged continuation of the “Two Excellences” emulation despite all the difficulties the DRV faced, calling for the building of unity among teachers, between teachers and pupils, among pupils, among cadres of different ranks, and between schools and the people in order to raise a new generation who could continue the great cause of the revolution of the party and of the people.⁴⁸ After Ho Chi Minh’s death in 1969, the party, the government, and social organizations continued the movement by evoking Ho’s legacy.

Theory, Practice, and Militarization

The Educators’ Congress of North Vietnam, convened in September 1961 when Ho Chi Minh published his article about education, decided to strengthen socialist education by putting more emphasis on combining theory and practice, intellectual studies, and physical labor. It aimed at developing in the new generation “scientific knowledge with the basics of industrial and agricultural techniques, and labor habits to make students ready to enter the process of building socialism.” To make the congress’s dry resolution more engaging, Ho Chi Minh on 27 September 1961 illustrated it with an anecdote about the failures of Confucius and his teachings, which Vietnamese had followed for many centuries. According to this anecdote, more than 2,500 years

46. T. L., “Một thành tích”; *Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam*, Chi thị No. 197 CT/TW, Hanoi, 19 March 1960; and *Chi thị về công tác thiếu niên nhi đồng* (Bắc Ninh, Vietnam: Ủy ban thiếu niên nhi đồng tỉnh Bắc Ninh, 1960), p. 4.

47. Phủ Thủ tướng số 88/TT, Chi thị về việc chuyên hương công tác giáo dục trước tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới, Hanoi, 2 August 1965, in VNA3, BGD 683, p. 1.

48. Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi các cán bộ, cô giáo, thầy giáo, công nhân, nhân viên, học sinh, sinh viên nhân dịp bắt đầu năm học mới,” *Nhân dân*, 16 October 1968.

ago Confucius was approached by a student who asked him about working in the fields and planting trees. According to Ho Chi Minh, Confucius said, “I don’t know.” The Confucian flaw of ignorance about practical work thereafter proliferated in China and Vietnam, with intellectual endeavor being valued more highly. It was now time to change this.⁴⁹

Many schools by that time already participated in a system of half-day study, half-day work. For example, a school in Hòa Bình Province (west of Hanoi) for youth cadres from ethnic minorities had been following this approach since 1958. Ho Chi Minh visited the school and shared his own experience of combining study and work in his youth, contrasting that experience to his view of Confucianism.⁵⁰ Another inspiration was a school in Bắc Lý hamlet, Hà Nam Province, that had implemented, after the Third Party Congress, a program of pupils combining study and work.⁵¹

Although not all children’s schools adopted this model, and although some that adopted it encountered logistical problems, the idea continued to circulate.⁵² Schools were expected to take part in production. For example, in Phú Thọ Province during the 1965–1966 academic year, schools contributed 32,717 man-days to digging ditches; caught 2,178 kilograms of insects and 44,078 mice; collected 417,135 kilograms of cattle manure and 90,651 kilograms of green manure; planted 144,333 square meters of rice, 992,191 square meters of maize and sweet potatoes, 97,393 square meters of green vegetables, and 232,034 perennial trees; raised 13,681 chickens; and caught 30,852 fish.⁵³

In 1965, with the “oppose Americans, save the country” campaign, the Ministry of Education ordered the militarization of schools. This was also not new. For several years, some schools had been supplying manpower to the front via infiltration into the South. But in 1965 the problem became more acute with the intensification of warfare, and the militarization of schools became the main priority according to instructions from the Ministry of Education. The official draft age was eighteen. But schools were expected to teach youth to have a brave militant spirit and to “prepare all necessary conditions to train pupils so that they would be ready for military service or direct combat

49. T. L. [Hồ Chí Minh], “Học hay, cày giỏi,” *Nhân dân*, 27 September 1961.

50. “Bài nói chuyện tại trường thanh niên lao động xã hội chủ nghĩa Hòa Bình, 17-8-1962,” *Nghiên cứu giáo dục*, No. 37 (May 1975).

51. Võ Thuần Ngo, *Bàn thêm những bài học của Bắc lý và phong trào thi đua “Hai tốt” trong ngành giáo dục phổ thông* (Hanoi: Nxb Giáo dục, 1963); and Vasavakul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam,” Vol. 1, pp. 456–516.

52. Nguyen, “L’enseignement general,” p. 18.

53. “Báo cáo Tình hình công tác giáo dục năm 1966 và phương hướng công tác năm 1967,” số 78/TH, January 1967, in VNA3, BGD 720, p. 8.

when necessary.”⁵⁴ Teachers and pupils were expected to learn how to provide first aid or liaison work so that they would be ready to join the war effort. “Direct fighting, generally speaking, is not for school pupils,” the document explained. However, exceptions would be made for high schools that had older students, at times of special demand, or when the urgency of a situation required. Schools, especially high schools with older students, were mandated “to practice military preparation and to teach knowledge of people’s war so that, when necessary, students can join combat.”⁵⁵ No document stipulated what age an older student (*học sinh lớn*) had to be to be sent into combat.

According to the Ministry of Education, pupils in grades three and four, as well as middle-school adolescents, could help the army make camouflage and serve drinking water in rearguard areas after combat. The document did not specify how the children would get to the combat zone to serve the soldiers. The older middle-school pupils could organize first aid units, serve as liaisons, monitor the enemy, carry out propaganda for victory, help little children evacuate, and maintain underground shelters.⁵⁶

Problems and Solutions

Despite organizing schools in the emulation movements and touting their successes, the government recognized that the DRV educational system was full of deficiencies. In September 1965, the Ministry of Education expressed deep concern that the educational system had not yet become a revolutionary force with an active political impact on the building of socialism and on the struggle for national unity. “Schools have not really become socialist bastions, and many teachers have a very low cultural level.”⁵⁷ The ministry believed that one solution for dealing with this problem was to build party influence firmly into the educational system. If a school had three party members, they were to organize themselves into a cell rather than continue as separate individuals. Schools were also to include more political education for teachers and pupils.⁵⁸ Another urgent matter, as defined by the ministry, was pupils’ participation in the workforce, so the schools were supposed to cooperate with

54. “Báo cáo về phương hướng công tác giáo dục trước tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới,” p. 7.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3; and “Vụ Tâu giáo,” Speech of the Ministry of Education official [possibly Lê Liêm; his name is at the top of the page], Thứ trưởng Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo Việt Nam, Bí thư đảng đoàn Bộ, Chánh Thư ký Công đoàn Giáo dục Việt Nam kiêm Hiệu trưởng Trường Chính trị Bộ Giáo dục (Deputy Minister of Education and Training of Vietnam, General Secretary of the Educational Trade

agricultural cooperatives and production sites by supplying students as workers.⁵⁹ This shows that neither the previous politicization nor the experiments of combining theory and practice had produced the results desired by the party and government.

Simultaneously coping with the lack of loyalty to socialism and the militarization of schools was a complicated task. Call-ups of experienced teachers to active duty and insufficient training for new teachers led to shortages of qualified teachers. Militarization of schools, even before the intensification of the war, wreaked havoc on the educational system. The Ministry of Education noted,

studies, production, and fighting are not balanced. Many places consider studies lightly, and are heavy on production and fighting. In their thoughts, people, parents, and even pupils are not enthusiastic about studying. . . . In many places principals excessively assign pupils and teachers to serve in production and fighting, [to a degree that is] not yet necessary, which affects studies.⁶⁰

DRV educational officials seemingly found themselves in a difficult situation. The success of their own propaganda may have been to blame for distracting educators and their students from study: too many pupils and teachers found it more appealing to contribute to the war effort than to educate and be educated. On the other hand, the ministry was also dissatisfied with the political and cultural level of the educators, perhaps revealing that the party's and the government's instructions were not being carried out. People in the educational system were caught in the middle and tried to do their best to perform what was required of them.

Recognizing this, the state intensified its efforts to politicize the educational system. In 1967, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong stressed the importance of education in raising people with revolutionary ideology and loyalty to socialism. He told teachers that, if they did their job well, by high school young people would be properly prepared and the revolutionary cause in the future would be assured.⁶¹ The Two Excellences movement was to be

Union of Vietnam cum Head of the School of Political Education), 1967, p. 3, in VNA3, BGD 763, p. 163.

59. "Báo cáo về phương hướng công tác giáo dục trước tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới," p. 3.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

61. Phạm Văn Đồng, "Chúng ta phải kiên trì và quyết tâm từng năm, từng năm xây dựng họ được một đội ngũ giáo viên trưởng thành"; and Hồ Chí Minh et al., *Giáo dục thiếu nhi vì chủ nghĩa cộng sản* (Hanoi: Nxb Kim Đồng, 1970), p. 77. Similar ideas can be found in Lê Duẩn, "Nhiệm vụ của các thầy giáo là đào luyện học sinh thành những con người mới của chế độ xã hội chủ nghĩa," in Hồ et al., *Giáo dục thiếu nhi vì chủ nghĩa cộng sản*, pp. 13–21.

strengthened, as announced in a special report to the Conference of the Administrative Committees from different regions, cities, and provinces held in 1967: “Teachers first of all are revolutionary cadres, boundlessly loyal to the revolutionary cause of the Party, of the laboring class, and of the nation. [They must work] for socialism, for the unity of the country, for the beloved pupils.”⁶²

With the Tet Offensive of 1968, Communist forces for the first time endeavored to attack the South Vietnamese and U.S. forces with conventional warfare in the hope that the people of South Vietnam would rise against their government and demonstrate that the RVN was not a viable entity. In late 1967 and the beginning of 1968, on the eve of the offensive, educational policies received much attention.

From 4 December 1967 to 20 January 1968, the biggest-ever “political education session” for educators was organized by a directive of the Communist Party’s Central Committee. This session was a reflection of interparty debates that surfaced in 1963–1964 in a moderate form and developed into a much stronger controversy in 1967–1968 about what to consider more important—the right class attitude and ideological virtue or the possession of expertise and skills. The session coincided with a strong movement in the Communist Party to assert the class character of the party’s base, the working class.

The main points that participants were taught during this session dealt with the importance of representing the nature of the war as being against the United States for the salvation of the country and of demonstrating the “brutal, perverse, and wicked nature” of U.S. imperialism. The war was also to be presented as the people’s war, not the government’s war. The participants discussed Communist and proletarian ideals and the need to strengthen party work at schools.

The timing of this session was not simply coincidental with the timing of the Tet Offensive. As the offensive was being prepared in strict secrecy, so, too, was the educational session. The participants had to follow strict instructions. They were not allowed to disclose to their family, friends, or cadres the location of the classes, and they were not to have any relationship or communication with others during the session. In case of emergency, participants were required to obtain advance permission to leave to deal with it from the

62. “Quán triệt đường lối giáo dục của Đảng, kiên quyết đưa sự nghiệp giáo dục tiến theo phương hướng cải cách giáo dục,” Báo cáo đọc tại Hội nghị UBHC [ủy ban hành chính] các Khu, Thành, Tỉnh, Phần ba. “Những tấm gương sáng trọng phong trào thi đua “Hai tốt,” 1967, pp. 2–3 in VNA3, BGD 763.

leader of the class, who would consult with superiors to determine whether it met the criteria in the instructions. Similarly, participants would have to obtain written permission to leave the premises of the session and were not to communicate with anyone about the content of the session. Educators were warned that they had to carry out the guidelines of the party on education because otherwise they would “inflict great harm on the cause of the proletariat with regard to the absolute and comprehensive role of the Party.”⁶³

In 1968, after the Tet Offensive, Ho Chi Minh sent a letter to educators, pupils, and students reminding them to raise their feeling of love for the motherland and for socialism, to strengthen their revolutionary spirit toward workers and peasants along with their loyalty to the revolution, to trust completely in the party leaders, to be ready to assume any responsibility the party and the people assigned, and to try always to be worthy of fellow countrymen in the heroic South.⁶⁴ The Ministry of Education immediately hailed the letter as “the supreme directive of our Party and of the State, the platform for action in the educational field.”⁶⁵

Textbooks

Shortly after this, on 31 December 1968, the prime minister’s office issued a permit to publish a journal titled *Nghiên cứu giáo dục* (Research in education). The first issue appeared in 1969. The journal was specifically geared toward the theory of education for administrative cadres in the educational field; its task was

to lead and propagate the work of realizing the line, the concepts, and the slogans of the Party, to use theory to analyze the creative application of Marxist-Leninist education, and to combine the achievements of the educational system in Vietnam with that in other socialist countries.⁶⁶

The only venue to publish school textbooks was the Ministry of Education’s own Education Publishing House (*Nhà xuất bản giáo dục*), established in 1957. This monopoly enabled total control over the content and distribution of textbooks. In addition to providing these advantages, the monopoly burdened the publishing house, the ministry, and the state. In 1971, the

63. “Nội quy của lớp học 45 ngày,” and “Vụ Tàu giáo,” 3 December 1967, in VNA3, BGD 763.

64. Hồ, “Thư gửi các cán bộ,” p. 102.

65. “Phương hướng bước đầu để chấp hành chỉ thị của Bác Hồ qua bức thư Bác gửi cho ngành ta ngày 15 tháng 10 năm 1968,” 4 February 1969, p. 1, in VNA3, BGD 774.

66. Đề án xuất bản Nghiên cứu giáo dục, 24 March 1969, pp. 1–3, in VNA3, BGD 789.

Table 3. Publications of the Ministry of Education Publishing House

	1968–1969	1969–1970	1970–1971	1971–1972	1973–1974
Books	275	329	300	280	275
Copies	17,012,041	18,095,000	18,126,075	18,700,000 + 1,300,000 more in Poland	24,000,000

Sources: For 1971–1972: “Báo cáo tổng kết công tác phát hành và thư viện phục vụ năm học 1970–1971,” 25 May 1971, p. 20, in Vietnam National Archive Center No. 3, Hanoi (VNA3), Bộ giáo dục (BGP) 815. For 1968–1972: Bộ Giáo dục, Cơ quan phát hành sách giáo khoa trung ương, “Báo cáo tổng kết công tác phát hành và thư viện phục vụ năm học 1970–1971,” 25 May 1971, pp. 7, 20, in VNA3, BGD 815. For 1973–1974: Nguyễn Văn Hải, “Tổ trình xin duyệt kế hoạch xuất bản 1975,” 19 July 1974, p. 2, in VNA3, BGD 917.

ministry admitted that publishing and distributing the materials was very expensive. Despite state subsidies, the publishing house ran deficits. There were also problems of misuse of funds. However, the publication and distribution of new books was an essential task that emphasized the ideological and political aspect of textbooks. Furthermore, many schools had only 40–50 percent of the books they needed.⁶⁷ Despite these difficulties, the number of published copies continued to rise steadily, with the assistance of Soviet-bloc countries, specifically Poland, which the DRV approached for help in printing. Textbooks, along with teachers, became the carriers of the educational concepts that the party and the government sought to propagate.

The textbooks were conduits for the same ideas and rhetoric that underpinned the education system. Textbooks in history, literature, language, politics, and mathematics emphasized the role of the party, the government, socialism, and, above all, Ho Chi Minh and the importance of the war against the United States for the salvation of the country. The general concept of education did not change during the war. In fact, the first educational reform after 1956 was not undertaken until 1979.

DRV Educational System in China: The 1950s

In addition to administering the educational system on the territory of North Vietnam, the DRV also administered an educational system for Vietnamese youth in the PRC. China had long played a role in Vietnamese educational

67. “Báo cáo tổng kết công tác phát hành và thư viện phục vụ năm học 1970–1971,” 25 May 1971, pp. 3–6, 12, in VNA3, BGD 815.

systems. In premodern times, Vietnamese adopted the Chinese educational and examination system, which continued until the first decade of the twentieth century. In the 1920s Ho Chi Minh brought a group of Vietnamese children to study in China under his tutelage. Following the Communists' victory over the Nationalists and the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949, Ho Chi Minh requested China's assistance in hosting DRV educational institutions that were displaced by the ongoing war with France.

A central campus was established in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Province, for several Vietnamese educational institutions, including the Pedagogical Institute, the Science University, and secondary schools. The final decision on this arrangement was reached on 20–21 May 1951, following repeated requests from Ho Chi Minh. Liu Shaoqi, then the vice chairman of the PRC People's Central Government, and Chen Yun, head of the PRC National Central Finance and Economic Commission, signed an agreement that the Vietnamese side would send adolescents to study in Guangxi, where China would help to establish schools and bear the brunt of the cost. The pupils would be taught in Vietnamese.⁶⁸

Then, on 23 May 1951, the Guangxi Provincial Committee related that, at the request of Ho Chi Minh, 2,000 pupils and staff would come to Guangxi Province to organize a secondary school affiliated with the Pedagogical Institute, which would also be relocated there. Among these would be 1,700 secondary pupils and 200 students of the Pedagogical Institute. This would allow children to escape the war. The location of the school site in Guangxi Province was chosen because of its proximity to Vietnam. Children would be able to plant vegetables and collect wood, thus reducing the expense of supporting them. The PRC promised to provide the necessary equipment and financial assistance for the school.⁶⁹ Some of the students who graduated from the secondary school eventually continued their education at the Pedagogical Institute.⁷⁰

The number of people connected to the Vietnamese educational network in China grew to 4,000. In addition, from October 1954 to December 1955, a

68. In the document Hồ Chí Minh is referred as “T” (Ding in Chinese, Đinh in Vietnamese), “Liú shǎo qí chén yún guān yú yuè nán sòng ér tóng lái guì xué xí dí pī shì,” 20–21 May 1951, in *Zhōng yuè yǒu yì lì shǐ jiàn zhèng – guǎng xī guì lín yù cái xué xiào zī liào xuǎn biān zhōng guó dǎng àn chū bǎn shù*, 2010), p. 3.

69. “Zhōng gòng guāng xī shěng wěi guān yú yuè nán èr qiān míng xué shēng lái guǎng xī xué xí wèn tí zhì zhōng yāng Zhōng nán jú bìng luó guì bō diàn,” 23 May 1951, in *Zhōng yuè yǒu yì lì shǐ jiàn zhèng*, p. 4.

70. Personal correspondence (PC) with a former pupil who studied there at the time and now studies the history of the educational system there, 17 April 2016

large military school trained more than 3,000 older students aged 20 through 23. The existence of the military school was kept secret.⁷¹

On 1 October 1949, in compliance with the General Military Command and the Ministry of Defense, the first Vietnamese Cadet School (*trường thiếu sinh quân*) was established in Thái Nguyên Province with four platoons of students for the first year.⁷² After the conclusion of the agreement with China in 1951, the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense selected and organized youth between the ages of fourteen and eighteen into eight companies (about 700 cadets) to cross the border into Guangxi Province, along with cadres, teachers, and other students going to the Central Campus there. When the cadets arrived, they were transferred to Guilin, around 230 miles north of Nanning. Some of the older cadets later returned to Vietnam to join the Resistance. For example, Vũ Mão, the future first secretary of the Ho Chi Minh Communist League and later the head of the Office of the National Assembly and the State Council, and Vũ Khoan, the future deputy prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, studied there. In August 1953, the Cadet School was incorporated into the Nanning Central Campus. Some of the cadets transferred to its secondary schools, some went to the Pedagogical Institute, and 30 were sent to study in the Soviet Union.⁷³

On 9 July 1953, the DRV Ministry of Education established the School for Children and Adolescents of Lushan (*Trường thiếu nhi Lư Sơn*), which was to be a nine-year general-education school.⁷⁴ Its pupils were children of high-ranking party cadres, members of the government, and army officers. Some of the children already had experienced battle in the First Indochina War. The school was established to prepare cadres for building Vietnam after the war. Initially, the school was to be located in a high-altitude resort on Lushan Mountain in Guangxi Province, close to the border with Vietnam. About 1,000 pupils and 200 teachers and cadres were sent there. However, the Vietnamese children found the climate too cold during the winter. To help alleviate health problems among pupils, students, cadres, and teachers, the Chinese government transferred the school to Guilin, where the cadet school had been located. The School for Children and Adolescents of Lushan

71. Ibid.

72. “Lịch sử ĐHSP Hà Nội: Từ năm 1951 đến năm 1956—Thời kì xây móng đắp nền,” <http://hnue.edu.vn/Tintuc/Tintonghop/tabid/260/news/6/LichsuDHSPHaNoiTunam1951dennam1956-Thoikixaymongdapnen.aspx>.

73. PC, 17 April 2016.

74. “Nghị định thành lập một trường phổ thông chín năm “Trường thiếu nhi Lư Sơn,” in *Lư sơn—Quê Lâm: Một thời để nhớ* (Hanoi: Ban Liên lạc Trường thiếu nhi Việt Nam Lư sơn—Quê lâm, 2003), pp. 23–24.

remained in Guilin until December 1957, when it was also incorporated into the Nanning Central Campus. In June 1958, it was relocated back to Vietnam.⁷⁵ The composer Phạm Tuyên taught in the Vietnamese schools in the Central Nanning Campus. He was the son of Phạm Quỳnh, a prominent intellectual, one-time minister in Emperor Bảo Đại's government from 1932 to 1945.

In November 1957, the Vietnamese and Chinese governments signed an agreement to establish a school in Nanning City, Guangxi Province, with a total of 3,000 people, including students, teaching staff, and administrative staff, and another school in Guilin City, also in Guangxi Province, with a total of 1,000 people. The agreement was for three years. All staff members were Vietnamese; China provided equipment and facilities. Vietnam paid daily expenses from funds that China provided to the DRV as financial assistance.⁷⁶ The agreement was apparently not extended.

DRV Educational System in China: The 1960s

Cooperation resumed during the Second Indochina war. After the United States started to bomb Vietnam in August 1964 and as the war intensified in 1965, the Vietnamese Central Party Committee and the government approached the Chinese government again to help organize a Vietnamese educational system on PRC territory. On 18 December 1966, China agreed to relocate Vietnamese schools to its territory. At the time, the Chinese school system itself was experiencing chaotic violence and upheaval brought on by the Cultural Revolution, and, partly in response to this, Chinese schools in Vietnam were being forced to Vietnamize their curricula and student bodies.⁷⁷ The Cultural Revolution, launched in May 1966, had destroyed the Chinese educational system and left the economy in shambles. In spite of this, Chinese authorities distinguished between their internal policy and the goals of their foreign policy. Even as Chinese schools in Vietnam were being integrated into the Vietnamese system, the Chinese agreed to construct schools for the Vietnamese school system in China, and if conditions did not allow them to

75. PC, 17 April 2016.

76. “Zhōng huá rén mín gòng hé guó hé yuè nán mín zhǔ gòng hé guó zhèng fǔ guān yú yuè nán zài zhōng guó shè lì xué xiào dí yì dīng shū,” 4 November 1957, in *Zhōng yuè yǒu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng – guǎng xī guì lín yù*, p. 7.

77. Han Xiaorong, “A Community between Two Nations: The Overseas Chinese Normal School in Hà Nội,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 12, 4 (2017): 34–37, and correspondence with former students.

provide full accommodations immediately, the Chinese would construct temporary schools for the Vietnamese. The Chinese also agreed to provide classroom equipment and funds for daily expenses.⁷⁸ This endeavor became known as project “92,” a reference to 2 September, the day on which the independence of Vietnam was proclaimed in 1945.⁷⁹ One of the schools designated for children from South Vietnam was called the School of 2 September. Another school for cadets bore the name of Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, a young Saigonese who in May 1963 attempted to assassinate U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara during the latter’s visit to South Vietnam. In October 1964, Nguyễn Văn Trỗi was executed by firing squad and became a revolutionary martyr in the DRV.

Construction of the schools was to be supervised mainly by military authorities.⁸⁰ In December 1967, three schools were united into the Vietnamese Southern School District, and the new system was effectively inaugurated.⁸¹ By August 1968, the majority of the construction was finished and another discussion about future cooperation between the Chinese and the Vietnamese took place. This meeting affirmed close ties between the DRV and the PRC and suggested a need to strengthen the political education of the pupils, combining theory and practice and incorporating an exchange of experiences gained during the Cultural Revolution in the PRC and the anti-American war in the DRV. The two parties also agreed that, if the Vietnamese wanted to return to Vietnam, they could take with them all the teaching equipment as well as weapons. (No weapons were mentioned in the previous documents.) If pupils later wished to return to China, the PRC would welcome them back.⁸²

The goal of establishing this school system was to create in a safe location “an advanced socialist school” that would correspond with the policy requirements of the DRV in 1967–1968. The system was to create a basis for the

78. “Guān yú yuè nán mín zhǔ gòng hé guó jī suǒ xué xiào qiān yí dào zhōng huá rén mín gòng hé guó wèn tí dí huì tán jì yào,” 18 December 1966, pp. 3–4, in *Zhōng yuè yóu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng – ruǎn wén zhuī xué xiào zī liào xuǎn biān zhōng guó dǎng àn chū bǎn shè*, 2015), pp. 3–4.

79. “Guǎng xī zhuàng zú zì zhì qū rén mín wěi yuán huì wài shì bàn gōng shì guǎng xī zhuàng zú zì zhì qū jì huá wěi yuán huì guān yú tóng yì jiǔ èr gōng chéng (zhī yī) zǒng gài niàn shěn hé yì jiàn dí hán,” 29 December 1967, in *Zhōng yuè yóu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng*, pp. 11–15.

80. “Guān yú chéng lì guī lín jiǔ èr xué xiào lián luò wěi yuán huì dí bào gào” 13 July 1967, in *Zhōng yuè yóu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng*, p. 7.

81. “Yuè nán ruǎn wén bèi děng sǎn suǒ xué xiào yǐ hé bìng yī gè xué xiào,” 13 December 1967, *Zhōng yuè yóu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng*, p. 19.

82. “Guān yú zài zhōng guó guī lín dí yuè nán xué xiào wèn tí dí èr cì huì tán jì yào,” 17 August 1968, *Zhōng yuè yóu yì dí lì shǐ jiàn zhèng*, pp. 18–21.

“preparation of a new people, a new generation for socialism and Communism.”⁸³ The main task of these schools was for pupils to learn revolutionary morality and the socialist spirit.⁸⁴ In addition, pupils were to become willing and enthusiastic fighters when their time came to join the army. Teachers had to teach the “Five Precepts of Uncle Ho,” and they had to identify clearly, precisely, and in depth the DRV agenda so that the children would clearly understand that the U.S. enemy was the reason the country was divided into two, their families broken, and their homeland destroyed. The schools’ task was to produce children who were eager for the government to call them up “to fight the Americans.”⁸⁵

The system included seven schools with more than 2,000 pupils, cadres, and teachers. They were concentrated on a limited piece of land (less than 1 square kilometer) that lacked sufficient classrooms and sufficient space for housing, outside activities, production, or social activities.⁸⁶ The deficiencies stemmed from the existing conditions in both Vietnam and China.

Many of the pupils, according to the bilateral agreement, were children of cadres and party members killed during the so-called Resistance Wars against France and the United States. Pupils were brought from different areas, including the South. According to the document, they represented approximately 30 nationalities (the nationalities were not specified). They arrived at different times, had different levels of education, different ages, and some had a very low cultural level. The main concern was that, despite their political pedigrees, the levels and even the natures of their political convictions were not homogenous. One group seemed to be on the right track and followed the North Vietnamese government line. This group was “in the care of the Party and of Uncle and that’s why they had hatred towards the Americans and their lackeys [South Vietnamese anti-Communists] who sell the country.” Pupils in this group were “connected to socialism, felt absolute trust in Uncle Ho and in the Labor Party of Vietnam.” On the other side of the spectrum were pupils who had experienced the “putrid American influence” and lacked discipline, a sense of national identity, and love for the nation.⁸⁷

83. Giám đốc của Khu Giáo dục học sinh miền Nam tại Quê Lắm tới Bộ Giáo dục, Khu Giáo dục H.S.M.N (Học sinh miền Nam), “Báo cáo Tổng kết năm học 1967–1968,” p. 26, in VNA3, BGD 754.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

In addition to these difficulties, the schools lacked for teachers, and the teachers who were hired had a very low level of education, according to the documentary evidence. Many thought going to Guilin was a mistake and wanted to return home. Many did not have revolutionary morale and thus made serious mistakes, such as forming illicit liaisons with cadres of the opposite sex and violating the principles of socialist education (e.g., hitting students or disciplining them by forcing them to write or to stand). The spirit of love, of human connection, and of care for one another was weak.⁸⁸ The problem was not only with the teachers but also with the cadres who were there to administer the program—they had poor administrative skills. Many were still “under the old conventions and backward concepts” that prevailed over revolutionary notions of friendship, love, and service. Their bad attitudes dominated their commitments to the Pioneer and Augustist Organizations, the Youth Labor Union, and the Communist Party, which were “not yet deep.”⁸⁹

Material problems aggravated ideological difficulties. The schools existed in a difficult economic situation. Living quarters were overcrowded and did not meet hygienic requirements. Classrooms were not sufficiently equipped. Sometimes children of very different ages had to study together. The logistical difficulties included a lack of teaching materials, since materials sent from Vietnam arrived slowly.⁹⁰ Many teachers and cadres in the Vietnamese Guilin schools were not sympathetic to China’s internal problems. Many of them tried to find ways to return to North Vietnam.⁹¹ Despite these difficulties, the system persevered until mid-1975, when it was terminated and all students, teachers, and administrators returned to Vietnam.⁹²

When the DRV school system in China was being set up, some Vietnamese children, like children from other socialist or pro-socialist countries in Asia and elsewhere, went to Soviet-bloc countries in Eastern Europe.⁹³ There they could, like Vietnamese students in China, be shielded from the war while

88. Ibid., pp. 5, 14.

89. Ibid., p. 18.

90. Ibid., p. 1.

91. Ibid., p. 18.

92. “Trần Khánh Chiến, Quê Lâm—Vùng đất mang nặng ân tình,” <http://www.baomoi.com/Que-Lam-vung-dat-mang-nang-an-tinh/c/16505018.epi>

93. See, for example, Karin Weiss, “Vietnam: Netzwerke zwischen Sozialismus und Kapitalismus,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 30 June 2005, <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/28970/vietnam-netzwerke-zwischen-sozialismus-und-kapitalismus?p=all>; Mirjam Freytag, *Die “Moritzburger” in Vietnam: Lebenswege nach einem Schul- und Ausbildungsaufenthalt in der DDR: Vermitteln in interkulturellen Beziehungen* (Frankfurt: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1998); and Šárka

also receiving a proper socialist education and the basis for an imagined international socialist community under the leadership of the Soviet Union. The numbers of those sent to the East European countries was, however, insignificant. In some cases Vietnamese teachers accompanied the students, but most remained under the purview of the host country, not part of a Hanoi-based educational system.

In China, the DRV established a system of its own: schools administered by Vietnamese, with Vietnamese teachers teaching Vietnamese curriculum in Vietnamese. This likely happened because China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and could not incorporate Vietnamese into its shattered school system. However, the same kind of Vietnamese educational system (i.e., one isolated from the host country) had existed in the 1950s prior to the Cultural Revolution. Vietnamese authorities were likely inspired simply by a desire to create their own system in China by which to raise children in a specifically Vietnamese mold.

The existence of the Vietnamese school system in China serves as an example of leverage that the DRV apparently had vis-à-vis China in the context of the Sino-Soviet confrontation. Even as the PRC destroyed its own educational system, it was amenable to hosting its neighbor's students in a system established by the Vietnamese, apparently as part of fulfilling its international proletarian responsibility in the Cold War crusade against the United States, no matter how attenuated this role had become by 1975. Despite being in a safe location, the DRV educational system in China was plagued by the same problems that existed in the DRV itself. The problems in China seemed to be more prominent, however, because of the isolated position of the DRV school system there. Although some former students probably fought against the Chinese in the Sino-Vietnamese War that broke out in 1979 and some, as I was told, harbor resentment toward China, other students who studied there reflected warmly about their experience and expressed appreciation for what China had done for them.

In establishing these schools during the war years of 1965–1975, while eliminating the educational diversity that had existed previously, the DRV created its own educational empire with a North Vietnamese-centered agenda. In doing so, it was perhaps emulating the Soviet pattern of projecting its ideology through its satellites. Already in the early 1960s, an estimated 1,000 students from areas of Laos under the control of the Laotian Communist Party (the Pathet Lao) were studying at the secondary level in North Vietnam. From

Martínková Šimečková, "Chrastavské děti," Klub Hanoi, 11 July 2006. Thanks to Alena Alamgir for discussing this issue with me.

1964 to 1974, 6,235 Laotian students enrolled in North Vietnamese schools at all levels (from primary to higher education), in humanities, social sciences, and technology.⁹⁴ In addition to sending its own pupils to study in China and bringing Laotian children to mold them in the Vietnamese Communist pattern, the DRV also planted its roots in the educational landscape of South Vietnam.

The DRV Educational System in the RVN

In addition to administering the educational system in North Vietnam and its branch in China, the DRV also directed an educational system in areas controlled by Communists on the territory of the RVN, which it called “liberated areas.” The system was established in the early 1950s. During this time, the DRV was still fighting the French. The DRV government was in the mountainous Việt Bắc region, north of Hanoi, and there the DRV Ministry of Education established a separate educational office for South Vietnam (*phòng giáo dục miền Nam*), which was placed under the direct control of the Communist Party Central Committee.⁹⁵ From 1954 to 1960, the RVN government under Ngo Dinh Diem cracked down on schools organized by Communist cadres, and they moved to the Plain of Reeds, in the western part of the South, where they were inaccessible to government troops. There the cadres established villages and schools.⁹⁶

In 1960, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) was established and resumed the expansion of schools. In February 1963, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), officially known as the Central Executive Committee of the People’s Revolutionary Party (and the party’s headquarters in the South), issued a directive to establish an educational program to raise a new, well-rounded generation of fighters inculcated in Marxism-Leninism.⁹⁷

94. Vatthana Pholsena, “War Generation: Youth Mobilization and Socialization in Revolutionary Laos,” in Vanina Bouté, ed., *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), p. 115.

95. Đảng đoàn Bộ Giáo dục, “Tổng hợp những nét lớn về tình hình giáo dục miền Nam từ 1954 đến đầu năm 1966,” p. 5, in VNA3, BGD 738.

96. Vasavakul, “Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam,” Vol. 2, p. 569.

97. Ibid., p. 570; *Giáo dục thời kỳ chống Mỹ khu Tây Nam Bộ* (Hanoi: Ban Biên tập truyền thống tây Nam Bộ, 1989); *Kỷ niệm 40 năm thành lập các trường văn hóa kháng chiến đồng bằng Cửu Long: Giáo dục thời kỳ chống Pháp* (Hanoi: Ban Biên tập truyền thống tây Nam Bộ, 1989); and Võ, *35 năm*, p. 213.

According to the DRV Ministry of Education, by 1975 these areas had their own educational system with 148,000 pupils in elementary schools and 1,500 in secondary schools.⁹⁸ The DRV played a significant role in the formation of educational policies for the schools. In 1965 alone, 483 teacher-cadres were dispatched to South Vietnam, known as “area B” in DRV documents.⁹⁹ Although many of the teachers came from the South, “the number of educational cadres and of teachers from the North who are brought to help the educational apparatus [in the South] also constituted a good part.”¹⁰⁰ The total number of teachers sent to the South from 1961 to 1975 was cited as 4,000.¹⁰¹

In 1965, the educational system in the NLF areas of the RVN had two levels, elementary and secondary. In 1965, the highest grade in the secondary level was the sixth (in rare cases, it included the seventh grade). The numbering of the grades corresponded to the DRV educational system. Completing the second level, children, even though still young, were expected to go to work in the resistance (*công tác kháng chiến*).¹⁰²

The educational system in the liberated areas operated under significant stress and did not meet the standards desired by the North Vietnamese government. As was sometimes the case in the North itself, as well as in the DRV school system in China, the quality of the teachers was not high. A North Vietnamese document offered a harsh appraisal of the teachers’ abilities “Teachers are devoted, with a high [level] of revolutionary enthusiasm, always very courageous, ready to go on the attack, daring to get close to the enemy’s posts to attract children to study. But as for the subjects and culture, their level is very low.”¹⁰³ The document also questioned the teachers’ dedication to their work. Because “[t]he political level has some weak spots,” it said, the number of party and labor youth members among teachers should be increased. For example, in Bình Định Province, on the south-central coast, some teachers

98. “Báo Cáo—Kết quả tìm hiểu và nghiên cứu tình hình giáo dục miền Nam của 2 đoàn công tác ở B1 và B2 trong tháng 5 và 6, 1975,” 15 August 15, pp. 1–5, in VNA3, BGD 920. John Spragens, using NLF statistics, gives the number of pupils in the primary and secondary schools in NLF-controlled areas in 1964 as 400,000, but this number is not corroborated; John Spragens, Jr., *Education in Vietnam: Young People and Education* (N.p.: A Looking Back Publication, 1971), p. 45. Võ Thuần Nho, referring to statistics from the Provisional Government of South Vietnam, puts the numbers at 40,178 in July 1972 and 94,520 in 1975. *Võ, 35 năm*, p. 225.

99. “Tổng hợp những nét lớn về tình hình giáo dục miền Nam từ 1954 đến đầu năm 1966,” p. 40, in VNA3, BGD 738.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

101. *Võ, 35 năm*, p. 200 n. 2.

102. “Tổng hợp những nét lớn về tình hình giáo dục miền Nam từ 1954 đến đầu năm 1966,” p. 36.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

were abandoning their classrooms and returning to their home villages in the Mekong Delta; and a small number of teachers lacked the spirit of responsibility, worrying only about their material well-being and trading and bartering, in the course of which they neglected their classes and pupils.¹⁰⁴

The Communists faced a serious dilemma in developing their system of education in South Vietnam in wartime. Both elementary and middle-school levels needed further development because they were a source of future teachers.¹⁰⁵ North Vietnamese officials believed it was necessary to develop kindergarten and elementary-level schools as well as the middle-school system, but they also stressed that “attention must be paid so that the development of the middle-school level would not have a negative impact on work in the resistance, such as conscripted labor, army conscription, etc.”¹⁰⁶

The DRV government was aware that this dilemma also put the educational system in the Communist-controlled areas into competition of sorts with its enemies in the RVN educational system. The inability to continue education in the controlled territories beyond the sixth or seventh grade and the impending recruitment into military service made pupils’ parents uneasy. In some places, families sent their children away to continue their education in territories controlled by the RVN government.¹⁰⁷

Another problem aggravating the low quality of teachers, similar to the situation in the DRV system in China, was the lack of teaching materials that fit the party’s agenda. Teachers often had to copy exercises by hand. Printing facilities for the Communists in the South were very poor, and in 1965 they published no more than several tens of thousands of reading books for lower grades.¹⁰⁸ The situation was so difficult that teachers did not know what to do. Occasionally, they borrowed materials from “enemy textbooks.” The DRV Ministry of Education assessed that the best option was to use newspaper articles about the resistance. The ministry did not specify from which newspapers these articles were to come, only that high aesthetic quality was less important than accurate content. Thus, the ministry stressed the curriculum’s agenda rather than its depth. If teachers were fortunate to receive a textbook from the North, they considered it a treasure. The DRV Ministry of Education recognized that the “content of the revolution” was different in the North and

104. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the South, “but studying texts [from] literature [textbooks] still brings the propaganda of socialism from the North.”

The goal of literary education, as seen by the Communist Party, was to educate children not in literature but in ideology. The subject of history played a similar, even identical, role. DRV Ministry of Education reports indicate that literature and history textbooks were transported to the South, but not geography or science textbooks.¹⁰⁹

Shortly after the Tet Offensive in 1968, the DRV Ministry of Education established a special Central Training School (*trường bồi dưỡng trung ương*) to prepare educational cadres to be sent to the South.¹¹⁰ But the situation started to change as the war drew to a close and the North started to view the South as an integral part of a united Vietnamese state rather than as a work-in-progress. On 19 July 1972, the Ministry of Education decided to establish “Curriculum and textbooks [for] B” (B being a code name for South Vietnam).¹¹¹ To achieve this, the DRV Ministry of Education in July 1972 established a special “office” (*ban*) to work on the curriculum and textbooks for South Vietnam. The office consisted of eight people. By October the office had been upgraded to the status of a camp (*trại*), with the addition of 23 teachers from the South and a general expansion to 90 people. The government paid all expenses for “fund B,” the fund designated for South Vietnam.¹¹² In 1973, the camp was further expanded.¹¹³

Tố Hữu, a poet, party ideologue, member of the Politburo, and strong proponent of class struggle and proletarian culture, delineated the tasks and the organizational system of the camp with statements made in November 1972 and August 1973. According to Tố Hữu, the educational program was “a weapon to build education in the liberated areas and to fight the enemy’s enslaving education. If [we] want comrades to go to the B [South] and manage their activities there, [if we] want them to act there as a great army, [we] must supply them with weapons: curriculum and textbooks.” The North intended to unify the two systems, modeling the system in the South according to the northern pattern.¹¹⁴

109. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

110. Võ, *35 năm*, p. 199.

111. “Trại chương trình và sách giáo khoa ‘B’ (Từ ngày thành lập 7-1972 đến nay, 1974),” pp. 6–7, 18, in VNA3, BGD 897.

112. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7, 18–19.

113. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7, 18.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Because of the essence of this new and complex work, immediate attention should be given to it so that the political task will be served in a timely manner but also so that both political and scientific ways will be guaranteed; because of the situation in the South there are changes in its political complexion, especially in 1973 when the enemy stepped up their tricks of pacification and encroachment and the leadership of the ministry was not consistent, and consequently the camp encountered quite a few difficulties in regard to the crucial issue, which is to define our long-term tasks in the direction of striving to build and to stabilize our organizations, to define the content of our work, and to foster cadres.¹¹⁵

The camp was in charge of preparing teachers to work in South Vietnam, and it sent a group of cadres to Quảng Trị (just across the border in the RVN) to prepare local cadres.¹¹⁶

As in other parts of the educational system, however, the DRV had a cadre problem. People assigned to the camp who were supposed to write textbooks and train the people to be sent to the South were not qualified for the job. They were novices compiling textbooks, and they knew nothing about the people of the South, the youth and children there, or the South's educational system.¹¹⁷ Even the southerners who joined the camp in late 1972 could not rectify the situation; they had been away from the South for a long time and no longer knew much about the situation there.¹¹⁸ Consequently, some suggested that cadres from the camp go to the South to learn what was happening there and so become more effective in their tasks. Also, the camp asked for the permission and aid of the ministry to obtain teaching materials from Saigon "to study neo-colonialism in the areas of culture and education."¹¹⁹

Not everyone was enthusiastic about the camp. Some argued that the liberated areas did not need special curricula or textbooks and could make do with the textbooks used in the North. Printing tens of thousands of copies of new textbooks would be too expensive at a time when resources were needed to supply the South with weapons and food. The activity of the camp ought to be slowed and then dissolved after signing an agreement to print textbooks in

115. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

China.¹²⁰ Such views, however, were apparently not deemed persuasive. The camp continued to operate.¹²¹

A series of books under the aegis of the Liberation Publishing House (Nhà xuất bản Giải phóng) was produced as though published in South Vietnam. This was an effort to differentiate between the DRV and the Communists in the South, thus supporting the DRV's preferred image that they had no hand in the actions of the Southern Communists. In reality, the Liberation Publishing House was operated in the North with the assistance of Chinese advisers. Cadres from the DRV Ministry of Education and people from the camp played an important role, "starting from the complete editing of manuscripts, taking them to Beijing (China) for correction and printing, and closely following [every step in] transporting the books to the South."¹²²

In 1973, 77 books were completed. In 1974, 62 manuscripts were completed, and plans were made to publish them in China by the middle of 1975. At the end of 1974, the ministry reported that the camp had compiled almost all textbooks for the three levels of general education. In 1975, another 45 books were completed.¹²³

After the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, DRV officials had to deal with the educational system they took over in the South. The earlier work preparing textbooks proved not to have been in vain, as few materials in the South fit the agenda of the Communist government. The Communist authorities in the South also had to deal with teachers. According to a DRV assessment in August 1975, some of the teachers were associated with the RVN. Some had a low level of preparation. The majority simply wanted a quiet life and worked for a living. A small number were "progressive" teachers who became associated with the revolution after the liberation. If they were successfully reformed (*cải tạo*), they could be mobilized into the new system. Teachers' reformation was to start "from political education, Marxism-Leninism, to completely purge each point of idealistic and reactionary philosophies."¹²⁴

Although the DRV authorities were not enthusiastic about the South Vietnamese teachers and believed that only a small number of them could

120. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

121. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

122. *Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục Việt Nam: 55 năm xây dựng trường thành và phát triển (1957–2012)* (Hanoi: Nxb Giáo dục, 2013), p. 18.

123. "Trai chương trình," p. 7.

124. "Vài nhận xét bước đầu," pp. 1–3, in "Báo Cáo—Kết quả tìm hiểu," pp. 1–5.

be reformed to fit their mold, this did not necessarily demonstrate weakness in the South Vietnamese system of education, which was simply incompatible with that of the Communists. In internal documents, the Communist Ministry of Education recognized the achievements of the South Vietnamese educational system and acknowledged that school equipment in the South was in good shape.¹²⁵ This admission went hand-in-hand with an assertion that people who lived in the territories formerly controlled by the Saigon government, “the temporarily occupied areas,” had loathed the education of the United States and its puppets and that the pupils had been disgusted by and afraid of this poisonous education.

Nonetheless, the North admitted the difficulties the Communists of the NLF in the South were having in attracting pupils from RVN schools, even in the areas under NLF control. This recognition was an acknowledgement of the successes of the RVN educational system:

With the goal to prepare mercenaries and lackeys, with the goal to deceive and show off, the reactionary education of the Americans and their puppets was quite strong, especially in the cities and the areas they controlled for a long time, creating a façade of prosperity for their reactionary regime. Our enemies had a lot of formulas and methods for improving the organization of education in order to carry out their political and economic stratagems, using such methods as establishing schools in small local areas, opening community schools, general secondary schools, technical secondary schools, secondary schools of agriculture, forestry, and livestock. The investments and assistance of Americans and their vassals for education was rather strong.¹²⁶

Education in the RVN

Unlike in the North, where the same minister of education served from November 1946 until October 1975, more than 25 ministers of education succeeded one another in the South during that same period. The focus of the ministry also changed, as did its name, from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Culture and Education and then to the Ministry of Culture, Education, and Youth.¹²⁷ During the period from 1965 to 1975, seven

125. *Ibid.*

126. *Ibid.*

127. In addition to Vasavakul's dissertation (“Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam”), see Masur, “Hearts and Minds,” pp. 43–71, on the educational system under Diêm.

ministers headed the various incarnations of the RVN's Ministry of Education. The mostly short tenures of these ministers were partly the result of the unstable political situation during the interregnum period from late 1963, when the First Republic fell, to 1967, when the Second Republic was organized. As time went on, administrative appointments were less volatile. Two Ministers of Education, Nguyễn Lưu Viên, a doctor and previous minister of internal affairs, and Ngô Khắc Tĩnh, a lawyer and previous minister of information, successively led the Ministry of Education for five years and three months, from January 1969 to 23 April 1975.

Diversity of Schools

Compared to the North, South Vietnamese society was much more diverse, both in its class, political, and religious composition and in the people's economic standing. A small elite consisted of large landowners, successful businessmen, and the upper crust of government officials. There was a small and largely urban middle class. The majority of the population comprised peasants, manual laborers, and petty traders. Religious groups included Christians, Buddhists, Cao Đài, and Hòa Hảo, some of whom were hostile to each other, to the government, or to both. Numerous political parties represented various regions or ideological inclinations. Furthermore, the South Vietnamese population included a large number of ethnic groups. The most populous of these, ethnic Chinese, lived mostly in urban centers. In the Central Highlands were many ethnic groups with their own ways of life and attitudes of mistrust toward one another and toward the lowland Vietnamese. Diverse groups of Chams, some Hindu-Buddhist, some Muslim, and some more acculturated to the Vietnamese, lived in Saigon and in regions to the northeast and southwest of Saigon. Finally, in the Mekong Delta was a relatively large population of Khmers who followed Theravada Buddhism rather than the Mahayana Buddhism of the Vietnamese.

The schools in South Vietnam reflected this diversity. The state-financed system of public schools was extensive and included not only general public schools, technical secondary schools, secondary schools of agriculture, forestry, and livestock, but also schools for children of ARVN soldiers who were wounded or killed. Semi-private schools were partly financed by the state and partly by individuals, organizations, and tuition fees. Most provided a general education. Private schools were completely financed by private citizens, organizations, and tuition. Some provided a general education, whereas others focused on the agendas of particular groups. Among these were French schools, rooted in the French educational system, and

schools organized by religious organizations, whether Buddhist, Catholic, or Protestant.¹²⁸

The education of minorities required special attention. Keen to maintain their own identity, the ethnic Chinese organized and maintained private schools for their own students. Among the 162 Chinese elementary and primary schools in South Vietnam, 46 percent, or 74 schools, were located in the Saigon–Chợ Lớn area, where the majority of Chinese lived. Although under the supervision of the RVN government, these schools enjoyed considerable autonomy. From 1956, the language of instruction was mandated to be Vietnamese, but often the Chinese school system disregarded this directive, especially in the lower grades. The same was true of the entire curriculum.¹²⁹ The situation with the minorities who lived in the South Vietnamese highlands or uplands was much different. In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem initiated “a program both to settle Vietnamese in the highlands and to encourage peripatetic upland peoples to make permanent settlements.”¹³⁰ In 1964 a settlement was achieved between the highlanders and the RVN, but relations remained precarious. The minority population resisted the authorities’ attempts to Vietnamize them.¹³¹ In 1964, the RVN government, in response to requests from highland leaders, agreed to permit instruction in the reading and writing of highland languages in the primary schools. But the ongoing conflict with the DRV prevented the linguistic research necessary to produce textbooks

128. In addition, some of the schools were gender specific: male schools included Pétrus Ký, Chu Văn An, Võ Trường Toản, Trường Hồ Ngọc Cần (Saigon-Gia Định); Quốc học in Huế; Phan Chu Trinh in Đà Nẵng, Võ Tánh in Nha Trang, Trần Hưng Đạo in Đà Lạt, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in Mỹ Tho; female schools included Trưng Vương, Gia Long, Lê Văn Duyệt, Trường Nữ Trung học in Saigon-Gia Định, Đồng Khánh in Huế, Bùi thị Xuân in Đà Lạt, Lê Ngọc Hân in Mỹ Tho, Đoàn thị Điểm in Cần Thơ; Chường Bình Lễ in Long Xuyên. Lasan Taberd was a Christian school for men, and Couvent des Oiseaux, Regina Pacis (Nữ vương Hòa bình), and Regina Mundi (Nữ vương Thế giới) were Christian schools for women. Examples of French schools include Lycée Yersin in Đà Lạt and Marie Curie, Saint-Exupéry, et Colette in Saigon, administered by the French Cultural Center. Privately funded French schools included Phan Van Huế, Pasteur, et les Lauriers. Under the auspices of the Buddhist councils were 137 schools by 1970, among them 65 secondary schools with 58,466 pupils. A system of schools for orphaned children of ARVN fighters killed in battle started to operate from 1963 in Saigon, and similar schools opened in Đà Nẵng, Cần Thơ, Huế, and Biên Hòa. Seven schools, with more than 10,000 pupils, were administered by the Ministry of Veteran Affairs.

129. Nguyen Van Hai, *Education in Vietnam: A Study in the light of Objectives of Permanent Education* (Huế: University of Huế, 1970), p. 172; and Mei Feng Mok, “Negotiating Community and Nation in Chợ Lớn: Nation-Building, Community-Building and Transnationalism in Everyday Life during the Republic of Việt Nam, 1955–1975,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington, 2016, ch. 2.

130. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, p. 564.

131. Larry R. Jackson, “The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (May 1969), p. 326; and Gerald C. Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam: Social and Economic Development*, RM-5281/1-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1967), p. v.

in the indigenous languages.¹³² As a result of Vietnamization policies and a lack of instructional materials, the highlanders did not establish their own educational system, and none were established for them. Instead, they were incorporated into the Vietnamese educational system. When they attended Vietnamese schools, they had to study in a foreign language and learn cultural concepts that were alien to them. Highlander pupils had difficulty catching up with their Vietnamese peers at the middle-school level. Moreover, many of the highland tribes did not have their own alphabet and regarded reading and writing with great suspicion. The Khmers and the Chams also spoke their own languages, which restrained their integration into the system.¹³³

The educational focus of each private school reflected its affiliation with a specific group. The RVN Ministry of Education thus had, at least until 1969, little control over the private educational system. The creation of the Directorate of Private Education helped to coordinate various curricula so they would more closely follow the curricula of public schools.¹³⁴

Organizing the Curriculum and Expanding Enrollments

Along with many features of French colonial education, the South preserved the French reversed numbering of school grades (the first grade was called the fifth grade, etc.). Consequently, the elementary five-year-long school, which a child was supposed to start at the age of six, comprised grades five to one. Upon completion of the elementary level, a pupil would receive a certificate. The secondary school consisted of seven forms that were numbered from seven to one. The secondary school was subdivided into two levels: the first one, or junior high, included four forms, numbered from seven to four. Upon completion of this level, a pupil would receive a diploma. The second level, or high school, included three forms, numbered from three to one. Upon completion of form two or one, a pupil would receive a baccalaureate I or II respectively. To avoid confusion in numbering between elementary and secondary levels, the elementary school grades were numbered using demotic Vietnamese numbers, and the secondary levels were numbered with

132. Hickey, *The Highland People of South Vietnam*, p. 50. For a fuller picture, see pp. 49–55. See also Frederick Wickert, “The Tribesmen,” in Richard W. Lindholm, ed., *Vietnam: The First Five Years* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), pp. 132–133.

133. Nguyen Van Hai, *Education in Vietnam*, pp. 171–174.

134. Nguyen Dinh Hoa, *Education in Vietnam, Primary and Secondary* (Saigon: Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations, 1971), p. 28.

Sino-Vietnamese numbers.¹³⁵ To pass from one level to another, pupils had to take competitive examinations. After completing the ninth grade, students who wanted to continue had to choose one of four tracks: two were focused on sciences (experimental sciences, leading to further studies in agriculture and architecture; or mathematics, leading to dentistry and engineering), two were in humanities (modern or classical literature, with an emphasis on philosophy; or literature and foreign languages, leading to law or letters).¹³⁶

In 1969, under the leadership of Nguyễn Lưu Viên, the Ministry of Education received the approval of the Prime Minister's Office to switch to the internationally recognized continuous numbering of grades that was customary in most other countries. The switch took place in the 1970–1971 school year. Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, the former deputy head of the Ministry of Education, told me that the suggestion for this change came from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The change gave rise to a joke in South Vietnam that they were following in the footsteps of the Communists in the North, who had already renumbered grades in consecutive order. The first year after the change, some textbooks came out with titles like *Vietnamese History: The Eighth Grade (The Old Form Five)*, a kind of last *adieu* to the French colonial system.¹³⁷

The South, similar to the North, made significant efforts to expand opportunities for children to enroll in schools. In 1965, the Ministry of Education announced a goal to raise elementary school enrollment to 85 percent in five years, with population growth being taken into account.¹³⁸ By the end of 1967, 75 percent of elementary school-age children, numbering 2,019,468, went to school.¹³⁹ By 1969, the percentage had risen to 76 percent, and by

135. Thus, *lớp năm* (grade five) for the first grade, *lớp tư* (grade four) for the second grade, *lớp ba* (grade three) for the third grade, *lớp nhì* (grade two) for the fourth grade, and *lớp nhất* (grade one) for the fifth grade. The secondary school forms used Sino-Vietnamese numbers (to differentiate, I use the word “form” instead of the word “grade” for the junior high and high school): *lớp đệ thất* (form seven) for the sixth grade, *lớp đệ lục* (form six) for the seventh grade, *lớp đệ ngũ* (form five) for the eighth grade, *lớp đệ tứ* (form four) for the ninth grade, *lớp đệ tam* (form three) for the tenth grade, *lớp đệ nhị* (form two) for the eleventh grade, and *lớp đệ nhất* (form one) for the twelfth grade.

136. The tracks were as follows: A, experimental science; B, math; C, language and literature; D, ancient language and literature; E, family economics (for women); F, business; G, public industry (*Công-Kỹ-Nghệ*) (for men); and H, agriculture. Family economics and public industry were obligatory subjects in grades six to nine after 1971 and were then one of the “specializations” in high school.

137. Tăng Xuân An, *Việt sử: Lớp Tám (Đệ ngũ cũ)* (Saigon: Nxb Tao Đàn, 1970).

138. *Progress of Education in Vietnam during the School-Year 1965–1966* (Republic of Vietnam: Ministry of Education, 1966), p. 11.

139. “Những thắng lợi: Về chương trình giáo dục tại Việt Nam,” *Giáo dục*, No. 20 (May 1968), p. 41; and Anonymous, reprinted from *Việt Tấn Xã*, No. 6,162 (25 January 1968).

Table 4. School Enrollment in North Vietnam, 1954–1974

	Total Population	Number of Primary School Pupils	Number of Secondary School Pupils	Total Pupils
1954–1955	12,664,000	432,538	61,625	494,163
1963–1964	15,673,000	1,574,679	295,693	1,870,372
1965–1966	16,511,000	1,661,044	370,668	2,031,712
1969–1977	18,325,000	2,375,982	636,921	3,012,903
1973–1974	20,341,000	3,101,560	1,091,779	4,193,339

1972 to 80.8 percent.¹⁴⁰ (See Table 4, which shows estimated total population and school enrollment figures for selected schools from 1954 to 1973).¹⁴¹ Furthermore, in 1972, compulsory education covered the first level of general education schools. The aim was to include, within ten years, both the first and the second levels into this category.¹⁴²

Even more than the DRV, the RVN made great progress in expanding its educational system. In the DRV the number of students increased 6.5 times,

140. “Kế hoạch phát triển giáo dục bốn năm (1971–1975),” *Giáo dục*, No. 59–60 (June–July 1972), p. 12.

141. Population numbers are drawn from *World Population: 1975*, p. 117. The numbers differ slightly in the *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam / Niên giám thống kê, Việt Nam 1972* (Saigon: Viện quốc gia thống kê / National Institute of Statistics, 1972), p. 357. I decided for Table 4 to use data from *World Population: 1975*, as it was also the source for my data on the population in the North. The data for 1954–1955 come from *Việt Nam Niên giám thống kê / Annuaire statistique du Việt Nam (1954–1955)* (Saigon: Viện Quốc gia thống kê / Institut national de la statistique, 1957), pp. 115, 117, 121, 123, 125. The total of pupils for years 1963–1970 is also derived from data in the *Statistical Yearbook*. The table is composed on the basis of the tables given in *Niên giám thống kê, Việt Nam 1972*, pp. 70–71. The data for year 1973–1974 is from Republic of Vietnam, Ministry of Education, *Progress of Education in Vietnam during the School-Year 1965–1966* (Republic of Vietnam: Ministry of Education, 1966), pp. 13–15. Other sources give somewhat different numbers. Based on data from *Progress of Education in Vietnam during the School-Year*, pp. 13–15, and from William A. Hunter and Liem Thanh Nguyen, *Educational Systems in South Vietnam and of Southeast Asians in Comparison with Educational Systems in the United States* (Ames, IA: Research Institute for Studies in Education, College of Education, Iowa State University, 1977), pp. 5, 91, the population for ages six to ten, corresponding to elementary school, is 2,920,000. With the number of students enrolled in elementary schools at that time being 2,718,036, that means 93.08 percent of the age group were enrolled (Hunter and Nguyen mistakenly calculate this as 90 percent). However, Hunter and Nguyen do not provide a number for the total population and, according to materials from South Vietnam, such a high enrollment had not yet been achieved at that time.

142. “Hội-đồng văn-hóa giáo-dục dự-án chánh sách văn hóa giáo dục,” 16 June 1972, p. 29, in Vietnam National Archive Center No. 2, Ho Chi Minh City (VNA2), Quốc vụ khanh đặc trách văn hóa [QVKĐTVH]/86QV4.

Table 5. New Enrollment and Matriculation Rates in South Vietnam

Level/Grade	Entrants	Graduates	% of Graduates to Entrants	% of Graduates Continuing to Next Level
1 (5–1)	699,000	177,000	25.30%	80.22%
2 (4–7)	142,000	60,000	42.25%	62.00%
3 (3–1)	48,000	10,000	20.80%	n.a.

whereas in the RVN it increased almost ten times. The DRV and RVN also shared a problem that only a small proportion of the pupils were able to get through the entire school cycle, as the rough estimates for 1967–1968 vividly illustrate (see Table 5).¹⁴³ The total population of the RVN at that time was 17,057,639. Assuming 30.5 percent were of school age, the school-age population was 5,202,580. The total number of pupils in primary and secondary schools during the 1967–1968 school year is estimated at 2,900,000, or 55.7 percent of the school-age population. From these estimates, we can calculate that the number of high school graduates in that year was 34 percent of the number of students entering elementary school.

As in the DRV, a significant number of children entered elementary school. Also as in the DRV, only a small fraction were able to complete the entire educational cycle. Comparing the numbers available for the DRV and the RVN is of limited value, because they are from different school years (1967–1968 for the RVN and 1970–1971 for the DRV). These, however, are the only statistics currently available. Given the fast development of the RVN educational system, the likelihood is that the 1970–1971 RVN numbers were closer to the DRV numbers for that school year. Moreover, the RVN educational system included twelve years of study compared to ten years in the DRV, and this affected enrollment numbers.

The ground war on RVN territory undermined Saigon’s efforts to expand the educational system. Other factors also hindered these efforts, some of which were unique to the RVN. For example, in the DRV all schools were public. The state subsidized them, and pupils did not have to pay tuition.

143. Report—USAID/Vietnam Office of Education Briefing Material, 1969, in Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Harold Winer Collection, Box 01, Folder 15. The data in this document differ from the *Statistical Yearbook* data compiled by the Institute of Statistics in Saigon by 5–7 percent. See also *Niên giám thống kê, Việt Nam 1969* (Saigon: Viện quốc gia thống kê / National Institute of Statistics, 1969). I decided to use the data from the USAID/Vietnam Office document as it is the only publication I found that provides the data per grade.

The only expenditure required was for textbooks, which were very cheap. The RVN school system included a range of public, semi-private, and private schools. The educational budget constituted 6 percent of the national budget, whereas the defense budget was around 60 percent. This large difference masks the significance the government allotted to education, however. Twenty percent of the non-defense portion of the national budget was devoted to education, making it the largest non-defense expenditure.¹⁴⁴ Still, the state could not build and maintain enough public schools to include more pupils. As in the DRV, pupils had to study in shifts. Many could not afford private or even semi-private education. Free government-run schools were meant to address this need. Even then, however, many parents relied on income from their children to support the family. Many poor families simply could not afford to keep children at school, and many offspring of wealthier families did not see compelling reasons to stay in school, believing they could manage in the growing U.S.-fueled free-market economy without a school education.

Reforms

The DRV government denounced the colonial educational system outright and established a new educational system as an extension of the revolution it was aiming to implement in Vietnamese society. The situation in the RVN was more complex. The RVN could not avoid dealing with issues inherited from the precolonial and colonial periods, and it was clear to intellectuals and government officials that the educational system had to change to be compatible with the goals of the new state.

In August 1949 and again in October 1953, the RVN Ministry of Education issued decrees defining the primary and secondary school programs. However, many people viewed these as basically replicating the colonial program. Numerous textbooks, such as Trần Trọng Kim's *Việt Nam sử lược* (Outline of Vietnamese History) and Dương Quảng Hàm's *Việt Nam văn học* (Literature of Vietnam), written during the colonial era, remained staples in the educational system.¹⁴⁵ In 1956 the Ministry of Education undertook changes in the school curriculum that stemmed from the idea of French

144. Report on Educational Development in 1967–1968 to the 31st Session of the International Conference on Public Instruction, Ministry of Education, Culture, and Youth, Geneva, July 1968, Saigon, 1968, cited in Nguyen, *Education in Vietnam*, pp. 136–137.

145. Lâm Văn Trân, “Góp vài ý kiến về vấn đề cải tổ chương trình Trung và Tiểu học hiện hành,” *Giáo dục*, Vol. 41 (September 1970), p. 11.

philosopher Emmanuel Mounier that each person is an end in herself or himself and not a means to an end, thus differing from Marxist collectivism. Personalism, as this came to be called, was a salient form of thought under Ngo Dinh Diem.¹⁴⁶ The RVN constitution, adopted during Diem's reign, reflected the importance of this strain of thinking. The curriculum reform of 1956 focused on bringing humanistic values into the educational system, respecting the sacred character of individual human beings, and teaching the rights and duties of a person as a citizen in a democracy.¹⁴⁷

The Ministry of Education expanded educational reform as approved by the Congress on Education held in July and August 1958 and revised in March and April 1959.¹⁴⁸ At this time, the government also established the Textbook, Translation, and Publication Service.¹⁴⁹ The Congress of 1958 defined three main principles of education — humanism (*nhân bản*), nation (*dân tộc*), and liberalism (*khai phóng*) — that informed the new program established for secondary schools by Decree 1286 on 12 August 1958, and for elementary schools by Decree 1005 on 16 July 1959. They were expounded and widely promulgated in a 1959 document issued by the Ministry of Education titled “Foundational Principles.”

The principle of humanism meant that individual persons were the ultimate goal and purpose of education; they were not to be used as the means to achieve a goal; the sacred value of each person must be respected; and the comprehensive development of each person must be the aim of education. “Even though education should be geared toward the development of a society, the ultimate end and goal of the State in a genuine democracy is to serve the fundamental interests of individuals. Because of this, the educational basis of the Republic of Vietnam must comply with personal freedom and the progress of society.”¹⁵⁰

146. On personalism under Ngo Dinh Diem, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 41–48.

147. “Báo cáo hoạt động 3 năm của Bộ quốc gia giáo dục từ 1955 đến 1957, p. 2 in VNA2, Phủ Tổng thống Đế nhất Cộng hòa [PTTDICH]/16342.

148. *Chương trình tiểu học: Nghị-định số 1005-GD/NĐ ngày 16 tháng 7 năm 1959 của ông Bộ trưởng quốc gia Giáo dục* (Saigon: Bộ quốc gia giáo dục, 1960), pp. 5–6. Also see Trần Văn Quế, *Sự phạm thực hành* (Saigon: Thanh hương tùng thư, 1963), republished without changes in 1969 by Bộ Giáo dục, Trung tâm học liệu; and Lâm, “Góp vài ý kiến,” p. 10.

149. Lâm, “Góp vài ý kiến,” p. 11; and *Eight Years of Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954–1962* (Saigon, 1962), pp. 427–428.

150. *Dự-án Chánh sách văn hóa giáo dục* (Saigon: Việt-nam Cộng-hòa, Hội-đồng văn-hóa giáo-dục, 1972), pp. 1–2. See also, Nguyễn Thanh Liêm, “Từ đầu thập niên 1970 đến 1975,” in Nguyễn

The second principle — nation — meant that education was based on the foundation of national culture and aimed to respect, preserve, and mobilize the traditional and spiritual values of the nation and promote the unity and continued existence of the nation and the harmonious and comprehensive development of the state.

The principle of liberalism meant that education must not impede progress and should respect the scientific spirit, accept the best of world cultures, and actively contribute to the promotion of humanity, sympathy, and harmony internationally.¹⁵¹ Vietnamese society of the olden days was monarchical and agricultural, but the Vietnamese monarchy, influenced by Confucianism and the system of village autonomy, was not autocratic. Moreover, agriculture in Vietnam was small-scale, and exploitation was not an issue before the French came. “Because of these factors, the essence of Vietnamese societal tradition is freedom and democracy.”¹⁵²

These principles meant that education ought to respect the personality of the child; to use national history to teach children to love their country and their compatriots; to welcome all foreign cultures while developing one’s own national spirit; and to develop judgment, a sense of responsibility, and personal discipline. However, these pillars of RVN educational policy remained abstract for many and generated discussion about whether an education policy was even needed and whether education should be politicized.¹⁵³

In 1964, another Congress on Education was held to assess the results of the program and to make necessary changes. The Congress proposed four changes: to create conditions for each citizen to develop human dignity and equality in moral, intellectual, and physical aspects; to prepare people with a specialized ability and a sense of responsibility to serve the nation; to mobilize national culture and absorb the best of world civilizations; and to develop technical and agricultural education to contribute to improving the well-being of the people.¹⁵⁴

Although these four points seemed to be more concrete than the previous three, they did not lead to significant changes in curricula. After the Congress,

Thanh Liêm, ed., *Giáo dục ở miền Nam tự do trước 1975* (Santa Ana, CA: Lê Văn Duyệt Foundation, Tập San Nghiên Cứu Văn Hoá Đông Nai Cửu Long, 2006), p. 24.

151. “Hội-đồng văn-hóa giáo-dục dự-án chánh sách văn hóa giáo dục,” p. 30.

152. *Dự-án Chánh sách văn hóa giáo dục*, p. 2. For a discussion of liberalism or openness, see Nguyễn Đăng Thục, “Giáo dục với xã hội khai-phóng Việt-Nam,” *Khai phóng*, No. 8 (1971), pp. 4–9.

153. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Chính-trị hóa nền giáo dục,” *Bách khoa*, No. 174 (1 April 1964), p. 52.

154. Decision from 15 October 1964 by the Congress. See Lâm, “Góp vài ý kiến về vấn đề cải tổ chương trình Trung và Tiểu học hiện hành,” p. 11.

educational leaders made no further mention of them. The program from 1958–1959 remained largely intact in the elementary and secondary schools, even though educational authorities acknowledged that it lacked relevance.¹⁵⁵ The lack of innovation was possibly a result of the continual changes in leadership at the Ministry of Education. The general approach to education underwent little alteration in later curricular initiatives, such as the one undertaken in 1967 and implemented for the first time in the 1967–1968 academic year for elementary schools, or the one implemented in the curriculum of 1970–1971 for secondary schools.

Textbooks

As with the DRV, the RVN also received assistance from foreign countries. In May 1955, Michigan State University sent scholars and advisers to aid the RVN nation-building program. In 1959, the RVN Ministry of Education reached an agreement with the U.S. International Communication Agency, one of the predecessors of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that was formed in 1961. Through this program some educational specialists, in particular from Southern Illinois University, Ohio University, and the University of Wisconsin, worked with Vietnamese to develop educational programs and train teachers, both in the RVN and in the United States.¹⁵⁶

The curriculum was introduced to schools through textbooks, the main publisher of which was the Ministry of Education and its successors. In 1968, USAID installed a new publishing machine, “Intertype Footsetter,” that significantly increased the ministry’s publication capability.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the United States, Australia, Canada, Taiwan, France, West Germany, and the United Kingdom took responsibility for printing a portion of the books. In 1970, these countries assisted with the publication of 2 million out of 14 million textbooks produced for use in elementary schools.¹⁵⁸ The publisher was

155. Ibid.

156. On the Michigan State University Group, see Richard W. Lindholm, ed. *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years: An International Symposium Viet-Nam* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959); John D. Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid: American Experience in Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, for the Council on Foreign Relations, ca. 1962); and John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998). On more specific educational assistance, see Ralph D. Purdy, *Kiểm thảo và hoạch định về nền giáo dục trung học tại miền Nam Việt Nam* (San Francisco: USAID and Ohio University, 1971).

157. *Viet Nam Bulletin*, Vol. 3, Nos. 14–15 (1–15 December 1968), p. 7.

158. Nguyen, *Education in Vietnam*, p. 137.



Figure 1. *I Study Syllables: The First Grade* (Saigon: Bộ Văn hóa giáo dục, 1969); *I Study the Vietnamese Language: The Second Grade* (Saigon: Bộ Giáo dục, 1969).

indicated as the Ministry of Education regardless of who actually printed it. Some of the textbooks were published with a credit to U.S. assistance: “To the elementary schools with the compliments of the American people in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and Education of the Republic of Vietnam.”

Unlike in the North, where all textbooks were published by the same publishing house, the South had dozens of publishing houses that produced textbooks. I checked 87 textbooks on literature, history, and citizenship and noted 22 different publishing houses. The variety of publishers had a bearing on the content of the textbooks, even though they were mandated to stay within the framework established by the Ministry of Education. Another distinction with the North was in the supply and distribution of the textbooks. Whereas in the North the centralized and subsidized system was able to supply textbooks for schools (albeit at times inadequately), the absence of this centralized system in the South often resulted in a severe lack of textbooks in schools. As a result, memorization played an important role in the educational process in the South.

The Problem of the War

The main deficiency of the educational system in South Vietnam was perceived to be its stress on book learning to the exclusion of other activities. A secondary flaw was thought to be the excessive importance of examinations, which had been paramount in precolonial times when Vietnamese followed the Chinese Confucian examination system in which students had to memorize ancient texts and then pass grueling exams. RVN officials regretted that this tendency had continued during the colonial period: “The French retained the conception of, and even multiplied, the examinations.” In their view,

education significantly deteriorated because its aims and objectives were obscured by the importance put on success at examinations.¹⁵⁹

By 1965, no significant improvement in the educational system had occurred. It still retained a focus on examinations and sought to shape the minds of students with the sole ambition of passing the examinations.¹⁶⁰ An even greater deficiency was the inability of the educational system to adapt to the realities of life in a country overcome by war and the flood of Western culture. The educational system did not want to admit or directly address either of these realities. Subjects such as literature and history, transmitters of ideology in the DRV system of education, and even moral and civic education, which were taught beginning in the first grade in the South, did not deal with these issues. Until the final grades of high school, the curriculum focused on teaching children how to be good people in the family, in the community, and in the country and introduced them to the main social institutions and laws.

Only in the eleventh and twelfth grades did the civics textbooks focus on different political systems, allotting several pages to a section about Communism. This section, however, was merely an exposition of the main postulates of Marxist theory and its evolution and was not akin to the blatant indoctrination found in North Vietnamese textbooks. Citing the Soviet Union and the PRC as examples of Communist states, the textbooks provided a detailed description of the state structures of those two regimes without mentioning the atrocities committed by them. The DRV was not included as an example. Instead of unleashing a barrage of opprobrium against the enemy, as was done in the North, RVN textbooks offered only several points for consideration that highlighted the deficiencies of Marxist theory. For example, one textbook pointed out that in free countries private enterprises had continued to develop and the petite bourgeoisie steadily increased, contrary to the Marxist theory of the concentration of capital in the hands of a small group of capitalists. Similarly, this textbook noted that, despite Karl Marx's claim that the state apparatus would be abolished under Communism, people in Communist states were in fact saddled with more and more government oppression, especially with collectivization.¹⁶¹

159. Republic of Vietnam, Ministry of Education, *Progress of Education in Vietnam during the School-Year*, pp. 27–29.

160. Ibid.

161. *Chính trị phổ thông: Giáo dục công dân các lớp đệ nhất và đệ nhị A, B, C, D: Niên-khoá 65–66* (Saigon: Sáng, 1966), p. 143. In the later period, the eleventh-grade curriculum switched from considering political to economic systems in the world. See *Chương trình trung học phổ thông, cấp nhất hóa* (Saigon: Nxb Bộ Giáo dục, 1970–1971), pp. 35, 37.

Not everyone agreed with taking an apolitical approach in school. In 1967, Nguyễn Văn Thờ, then the education secretary, gave a talk at the Lions Club in Saigon. In his speech, he posed the question whether in the country's present situation politics should be kept entirely out of schools. The secretary affirmed that any political activities had been forbidden within the schools, which reflected the national policy. But he suggested that outside school pupils were given freedom, "within the dictates of the law," to conduct political activities. In his view, schools could not be neutral or apolitical and instead "must guide and educate students in accordance with a political policy."¹⁶² But even if he really wanted to change the system, he would not have had time to do so. In the quick succession of senior government officials, he soon lost his ministerial position, and thus the situation remained largely unchanged. The wisdom of the state approach of separating politics and schooling was also challenged by the fact that the Communists did not abide by RVN policies and laws.

Just as the Communists were apprehensive that school-age children in territory under their control in the South would be attracted to RVN schools, the RVN was similarly apprehensive about the prospect that its young people would join the Communists. The Tet Offensive made clear that the NLF had managed to recruit many 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds. These teenagers joined the Communist guerilla forces because it was a good way to obtain guns and shoot "to their heart's content." The most vulnerable group was secondary school pupils who were tired of school and wanted to get out of their studies. Many were children of wealthy families who preferred a life of entertainment and idleness to study. RVN officials were concerned that the avoidance of politics in educational policy meant that these students would receive "only pure education," with very little chance of receiving any ideological training. At the same time, each school had Viet Cong cells that affected classroom culture. Some students were from the Viet Cong areas; they had relocated and helped one another reestablish their lives. Among them were some who adhered to the Viet Cong ideology and aimed to become loyal fighters.¹⁶³

Despite the wartime situation in Vietnam, and despite the fear of losing teenagers to the Communists, the government and the Ministry of Education did not significantly change their approach to the curriculum, keeping it under discussion throughout the war.¹⁶⁴ Despite recognizing that something

162. *Viet Nam Bulletin*, Vol. 1, Nos. 7–8 (July–August 1967), p. 136.

163. Nguyễn Quân, "Trong xã hội thời chiến," *Tia sáng*, 2, 3, 8, 9 (April 1968), p. 2.

164. Although changes to the moral and civic education program were introduced into the elementary school curriculum in 1967–1968, they were not significant, as seen in a comparison of two elementary

was amiss, they steadfastly maintained that educational policy must remain focused on the ultimate goal: individual dignity and promotion of the three basic principles: personal, familial, and societal.¹⁶⁵ They wanted to strengthen education on citizenship and morality, and they suggested replacing dry narratives with appealing life examples of sages, heroes, and martyrs, or with lively or epic literary pieces, musical compositions, poetry praising the extraordinary efforts of individuals and of the nation so that beautiful virtues would attract the attention of the younger generation and deeply influence its worldview and lifestyle. This approach might help children become good people in their families and good citizens in a progressive democratic state, ready to join the workforce or enter college or a professional school.¹⁶⁶ The RVN was looking for ways to improve the methods of education without changing the basic ideology or goal, but it was not doing much to prepare future fighters who could be expected to defend the concepts they were taught at school.

Even as the government vacillated about whether to introduce politics into schools, intellectuals grappled with a different issue: how to make studies more pertinent to the real situation in the country—specifically, what could be done about the flood of Western culture that challenged Vietnamese cultural and social traditions. When in the senior grades the subjects of statehood and ideology were introduced, their presentation remained on an abstract level, only loosely connected to contemporary events, if at all. The writer and educator Bùi Hữu Sùng, who moved to the South from the North in 1954, noted that pupils were taught medieval concepts, as in France or in the seminaries, that had nothing to do with the present situation. He said that even though this approach may have worked for previous generations, the current generation was very different. They liked to get together with their friends, chase after theater and music, ride their motorbikes very fast on the highways, and

school curriculum books published in 1960 and 1969. Moreover, they perhaps did not apply universally, as I did not find, for example, any changes on moral and civic education in the guides to practical pedagogy published in 1963 and 1969. The situation with civic education changed somewhat in 1970–1971, along with the reform that altered the numbering of grades. New elements in the civic curriculum were introduced that had more relevance to the current situation. *Chương trình tiểu học* (Saigon: Bộ Quốc gia giáo dục, 1960); and *Chương trình tiểu học* (Saigon: Bộ Quốc gia giáo dục, 1969). See, for example, chapters on morals (pp. 27–31) and civic education (pp. 9–15). On the other hand, the program on Vietnamese history remained unchanged, with one notable exception: while the 1960 curriculum (pp. 32–37) in the fifth grade covered the period until 1956 and highly praised Ngô Đình Diệm's role in the construction of the state, the 1969 curriculum (pp. 16–20) ended at 1945. *Trần Văn Quế: Sự phạm thực hành* (Saigon: Thanh hương tùng thư, 1963), republished in 1969 by Bộ Giáo dục, Trung tâm học liệu, almost without change, except concerning Ngô Đình Diệm as mentioned above (pp. 89, 93).

165. *Dự-án Chánh sách văn hóa giáo dục*, pp. 1–2.

166. *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 38–39.

copy the Beatles' hairstyles and wear clothes in the pop-art style. Their icons were not classical writers or poets, such as the nineteenth-century Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du or the eighth-century Chinese poet Lý Thái Bạch (Li Taibai) or even the seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Instead, pupils were interested in James Dean, James Bond, and B. B. King. Unlike previous generations that wanted to study for the future, the current generation wanted instant gratification. They tried their talents, and if they could sing in teahouses or any other venues and get an independent income, they eagerly did so. Their culture required merriment, quantity rather than quality, sensations rather than higher meaning. But this chase for everything glitzy killed their souls, depleted their energy, turning them into crushed grains of sand. How to turn them into a force similar to how a mason uses small grains of sand to build imposing tall buildings? Without such an effort, the Vietnamese nation would be decapitated, lacking real leaders like Winston Churchill and Jawaharlal Nehru. Bùi Hữu Sùng concluded that adults were responsible for all the errors that had led to war and the current situation and that it was their responsibility to find a way to revitalize education to cope with historic tribulations without losing their national traditions.¹⁶⁷

Apolitical education stemmed from many factors. The first was the goal to raise non-programmed individuals by focusing on a person rather than a system and to give pupils the sense of normalcy that the war jeopardized. Most of the people I interviewed who went through the RVN educational system said they did not know who Ho Chi Minh was or what Communism was about, and they remained unsure about the reasons for the war. The educational system in the South built a shield of normalcy against the wartime reality. The flipside of this apolitical approach was that the government left young people uncertain about whether they would be willing to fight against the Communists when their time came to join the army. Despite recognizing this deficiency, the government did not change its educational policy during the war. This reflected a desire not to mirror the heavy indoctrination of the DRV's educational system, as well as the diversity of Southern society, which comprised Christians, Buddhists, Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and others, as well as people with a range of political views, from pro- to anti-Communist. Unlike the DRV government, the RVN government allowed this diversity and, as a result, had to find a common *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* to maintain the stability of society. Because there was no possibility of suppressing the

167. Bùi Hữu Sùng, "Vài nhận xét về mười năm giáo-dục," *Bách khoa*, No. 241 (1967), pp. 28–29.

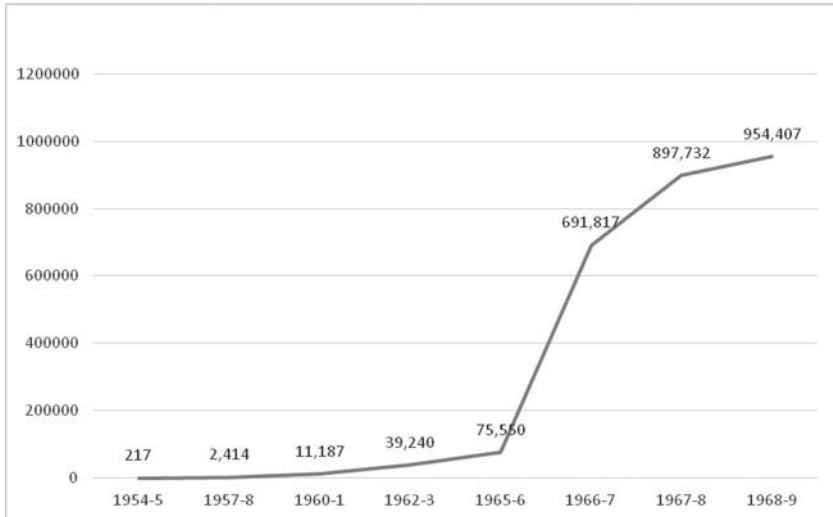


Figure 2. Number of Pupils in Community School in North Vietnam, 1954–1969.

Source: Nguyen, *Education in Vietnam*, pp. 122–127.

individuality of persons by homogenizing the society, the state had to balance its approach to educating the offspring of people representing this diversity.

Community Education

Although the government did not make significant changes in the curriculum, it attempted to connect education more clearly to reality. Government officials and educators sought new solutions. One suggested remedy was community education. This idea went hand-in-hand with the expansion of the educational system into the countryside, where many new schools were being built in hamlets (the goal was to have at least one school in every hamlet).

Eighty percent of the population lived in rural areas, but the majority of schools clustered in the cities. The concept of community schools was new in Vietnam and started as the Hamlet School Program, targeting the rural population of South Vietnam. The first experiment with this type of school was in 1954, but the results were not successful. Until 1963, the number of these schools rose slowly but steadily, reaching 75, after which the number increased exponentially. By 1965, there were 121 community schools. In the 1966–1967 school year, there were 852 community schools, and in 1967–1968 there were 1,336 (in comparison, there were 5,395 non-community

schools).¹⁶⁸ This program aimed to allow students to stay close to their local communities and to give them sufficient means to find their place in local society in case they did not have the means to proceed to the next level of education.¹⁶⁹ Students were encouraged to become an integral part of their local communities, and young people were expected to contribute their own resources to solve the problems of everyday life that their communities faced. Another aspect of these schools was their departure from the memorization mode that was widely used in schools before that time and characterized by teachers using “shout and holler” methods. The community schools were conceived as a space in which children were taught to discuss problems and to analyze and debate alternatives. Another basic goal of the community school system was to introduce children to democracy and freedom so that they could become leaders when their time came. These schools were also supposed to contribute more effectively to the counterinsurgency effort by involving both pupils and adults in village development and by isolating youth from the NLF. Their success was recognized in 1969, and they were expanded into urban neighborhoods. By decree of the Ministry of Education on 25 November 1969, all elementary schools had to become community schools.¹⁷⁰

The dramatic rise in the number of community schools not only represented a change in educational policy but also coincided with the stabilization of the political situation in the South, which enabled this implementation. Although the community school never replaced all elementary schools in Vietnam, it allowed the state to include more students in the educational system.

Conclusion

The educational systems in the DRV and the RVN were alike in some ways but different in others. Even though the two countries were in a state of war, both made significant progress in the development of their educational systems yet still had much to do to expand and improve them. Both sides had

168. *Giáo dục cộng đồng* (1966; Saigon: Trung tâm học liệu, Bộ Giáo dục, 1971), p. i; “Elementary Education,” *Viet-nam Bulletin*, No. 16, pp. 1–3; Nguyen, *Education in Vietnam*, pp. 122–127; and Hồ Hữu Nhựt, *Lịch sử giáo dục Sài gòn thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (1698–1998) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Trẻ, 1999), pp. 92–94.

169. “Republic of Vietnam Ministry of Education Educational Four-Year Development Plan (1971–1975),” n.d., p. 7, in Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, Box 11, Folder 02.

170. *Giáo dục cộng đồng*, p. i. The first time this text was published in 1966, 20,000 copies were printed; in 1971, the run was increased to 30,000 copies.

to overcome the deficiencies of colonial education. Both wanted the best for their youth based on their own understanding of “best.” Both claimed they were defending freedom and democracy. Both had to face war, albeit in different forms.

During colonial times, education provided, if only inadvertently, some means to challenge the system. Educated people were the ones who came to realize the tragedy of colonization and were looking for ways to put an end to it. In the postcolonial states, education aimed to point youth toward a beautiful national future. Because the futures envisioned by the leaders of the DRV and the RVN were so different, the roles of education in the two states differed significantly as well.

In the DRV, education was designed to deprive groups and individuals of any potential means to challenge the official ideology, norms, and practices and to enable the state to mobilize people for the war and for the construction of socialism. The DRV created a rigidly politicized school system focused on the war and the construction of socialism, preparing children from an early age to become warriors and providing them with a sense of clear national direction and moral certainty in the conflict being waged in the RVN.

The DRV, on the offensive, conducted an exhausting war to bring the RVN under its sway. From 1965 to March 1968, and then again in 1972, it had to live and function under U.S. bombing that inflicted devastation on the country and its people. To provide some children with a safer place for schooling, the DRV established an educational base in China to mold pupils to be loyal to the DRV cause. Not just Northern children but also Southern youngsters were sent to China as a way to prevent them from being lost to the enemy’s ideology in the RVN. The DRV created an educational mini-empire—eliminating diversity in the DRV, establishing a Vietnamese-based system in China, bringing Laotian children into the DRV, and exporting its ideology in the educational system established in the NLF-controlled territories of the RVN.

The RVN, on the defensive, had to cope with the presence on its territory of both its Communist enemy and its U.S. ally. At the same time, the social, cultural, and political composition of the South required pluralism and an educational system that operated under its constraints—a difficult task even without the urgency of wartime. The RVN was creating an educational antipode of the North, based on principles that maximized attention to values rather than the totalitarian Communist system. The RVN endeavored to separate schools from the war, largely taking politics out of the curriculum and leaving pupils to figure out for themselves the aims of the conflict and their place in it, stranding many of them in ambiguity. South Vietnamese educators

eschewed any push toward ideological uniformity, allowing youth a measure of freedom to develop their own perspective on what was happening in their country.

If the DRV system was depriving pupils of the means to challenge the government, the RVN was supplying children with such means. If DRV schools taught their pupils the necessity to expel U.S. forces and unite the country under the Communist regime, RVN schools failed to teach the necessity to defeat the Communists. The result of this was that many RVN citizens were unenthusiastic about joining the army and sharply questioned the policies of the state, not unlike what was happening in the United States and Western Europe at that time. But this situation reflected what the war was about: authoritarian uniformity or the complexity of freedom, the imposition of an official view or the right to form and maintain one's own opinions.

Did schools change the societies in the DRV and the RVN, or did the societies change the schools? As a result of the revolution and the end of colonial domination, both the DRV and the RVN educational systems were initially imposed from above and were not a product of the evolution of their respective societies. However, the situation eventually changed. The DRV educational system mirrored party and government ideas to become, using Althusser's term, the ideological state apparatus; it attempted and largely succeeded in reproducing Communist citizens. It changed DRV society as prescribed by the party and the government. The state and the educational apparatus established the pattern of *exo-socialization*—reproducing the citizens they aimed to reproduce.

The RVN's system, by taking politics out of schools, attempted to provide a place of peaceful coexistence for students from different backgrounds and to produce citizens to meet the state's long-term agenda of building a democratic society. In the immediate term, the South's educational system aimed to prepare youth to build a non-totalitarian society, but it did not mobilize youth for battle in defense of such a society. Negotiating existing diversity among the young generation had a significant and unpredictable impact on South Vietnamese society. It enabled individual freedom more strongly than it nurtured social cohesion—not necessarily because of well-formed government policies but simply because such was the Southern environment. As a result, youth exercised their rights not only by supporting the policy of the government but also by opposing it.

Although the DRV's success in imposing uniformity and ideological domination during the war was likely more beneficial for mobilizing citizens than the apolitical education of the RVN, its results and perpetuation proved disastrous in the postwar period, bringing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,

the ultimate goal of the Communist struggle, to the brink of economic ruination in the 1980s with many of the war-time pupils left questioning the axioms they had absorbed in their school years.

Acknowledgments

The research for and writing of this article were made possible by a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, a Texas A&M Seed Grant, a Texas A&M Arts & Humanities Fellowship, and a Texas A&M Faculty Development Leave. I thank Keith Taylor, Wynn Wilcox, and the anonymous JCWS reviewers for their extremely useful comments. This article will be part of a chapter in my forthcoming book *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965–1975*, to be published by Cambridge University Press in December 2018.