

[Moderator's Opening Remark]

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION? PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES FROM VIETNAM

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is always considered an important factor in the life and development of every nation. If the country's educational system is of high quality, it helps individuals to achieve their own economic, social and cultural objectives; it helps and strengthens society to be better protected, better served by its leaders and more equitable in important ways. Therefore, for all levels of education, improving and assuring the quality of education has always been among the most important efforts and concerns of the government, educational leaders and educators.

Vietnam is not an exception in this cause and a great deal of effort has been invested in the issue of quality assurance and the general improvement of the educational system at all levels. Educational budgets have been increased, especially to improve the quality of teachers, curricula, school facilities and educational administration. The term "quality of education" is heard everywhere and it is of great interest to all people - politicians, business people, scholars, investors, school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and community people. However, what is addressed here is the definition of "educational quality." Is quality of education the same or different across countries? In this paper, perspectives and practices concerning quality of education as it is used in Vietnam will be presented with the hope that agreement on its meaning can be achieved. Reaching consensus on the meaning of "quality of education" across nations will hopefully help in identifying the path to be taken in accomplishing our shared goals.

2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

"Quality of education" can be viewed and defined in different ways. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) affirmed that quality was "at the heart of education" which determines the enrollment, retention and achievement of schools. This has been proved to be true in Vietnam due to the fact that how well students are taught and how much they learn can have a crucial impact on how long they stay in the school system and how regularly they attend their classes.

UNICEF (2000) strongly emphasizes five dimensions of quality: learners, environments, content, processes and outcomes. Those are also the five dimensions of educational quality considered by Vietnamese educational leaders and educators. However, the way people define quality of education in Vietnam is a bit different. The quality of education in Vietnam is highly associated with the quality of the teachers, the quality of the curricula and learning materials, the methods of teaching, the learners' motivation, and the school's ability to prepare a student for life.

Quality of teachers

How teachers are prepared for teaching is a critical indicator of educational quality in Vietnam. However, teacher quality is very difficult to define as it depends not only on the observable and stable indicators such as teaching qualifications, but also on behavior and the nature of the relationship that teachers maintain with their students. In Vietnam, teaching qualifications are grounded on relatively objective assessments of skills, abilities and knowledge of teachers. In addition, other indicators are applied to assess teachers' quality; among which are years of experience, involvement in school activities, and pedagogical training.

Quality of the curricula and learning materials

The quality of curricula and teaching materials strongly affects the quality of education in Vietnam. Updated curricula and teaching materials partly ensure the students' success, not only at school but also in their life after graduation. The Vietnamese government and educational leaders have put lots of efforts into the process of reforming the curriculum and updating the national textbooks especially for k-12 education beginning from the year 2000-2001 academic year.

The method of teaching and students' motivation

Research has found a rather strong correlation between teaching method and students' motivation. Learner-centered approach has been proven to be able to produce greater motivation on the part of the students than the teacher-centered teaching method. This method also creates more interaction between teachers and students as well as between students and students in the classroom. The interactions promote more dynamics in the teaching and learning process and thus results in great student learning. In addition, many educational researchers advocate structured teaching which is a combination of direct instruction, guided practice and independent learning. This method of blended pedagogy has been demonstrated to produce high motivation among students, not only in the classroom but also at home. Vietnam has considered the methods of teaching and students' motivation to be very crucial in improving the quality of education.

How well the education prepares students for life

The applicability of schooling to life is an important factor in considering the quality of education. This factor is even more important in today's world when a students' success strongly depends on how well they can integrate and survive in the globalize era. An educational system which fails to prepare students to be successful in life would have to be considered as ineffective and of less quality.

3. WHAT DO WE DO TO ENSURE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION?

To ensure that the quality of education is as good as it can be, lots of effort and resources must be invested. Among these are training teachers, updating the curricula and teaching materials, equipping more school facilities, applying ICT in teaching and administration, and the use of quality assurance practices.

Teacher training

Standards for learning are now higher than they have ever been. Today's citizens need greater knowledge and skills to survive and succeed. Therefore, teachers need not only to be able to provide useful information to students but also to be increasingly effective in helping students to learn more complex material and to develop a wider range of skills (Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Teacher training has played a crucial role in the quality improvement of teaching and learning. Meeting the rapidly changing needs in education in the school system of a country is one of the most challenging tasks of a nation. The quality of teacher training has a decisive impact on the quality of education of a system.

Teacher training has been organized for both pre-service and in-service educators. While the training program for pre-service people takes longer training time and works with traditional students with little teaching experience, the in-service program offers professional upgrading for currently in-service teachers. Each program has its own objectives; the pre-service program prepares students to become new teachers while the in-service program helps upgrade and improve the current teachers.

Teachers have to continually obtain, develop and construct new knowledge and skills in their practice of teaching; this takes place throughout their career rather than acquiring a complete set of knowledge and skills from formal or non-formal training courses (Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Therefore, teachers need to be helped to become "adaptive experts" who are prepared for the challenges of lifelong learning which allows them to continuously add to their

knowledge and skills. Teachers, especially new ones, need to have a command of critical ideas and the capacity to reflect on, evaluate, and learn from their teaching so that it can continually improve.

Revising the current curricula and teaching materials

Revising the school curricula and teaching materials has been considered a must in the effort to improve the quality of education. This task is especially important in a country where the text books and curricula are centrally controlled by an office known as the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). In Vietnam, this task has been accomplished though it has not been able to meet the increasing demands of schools in a variety of geographical locations. Reforming the curricular and renewing the text books has been a steadily process and is the responsibility of the people at the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. In addition, school teachers are trained to design teaching materials serving the goals of their teaching areas or subjects. Workshops are regularly organized at different levels to provide the school teachers and leaders more knowledge and skills so that they are able to update the teaching material and make it more suitable with their teaching localities.

Applying ICT in teaching, learning and school administration

In the age of globalization, knowledge of the world can be reached from just a computer with internet access and teaching can be delivered in different ways - both traditionally in the class room and non-traditionally through distance or on line teaching. The use of ICT is no doubt an essential way to improve the quality of education, which can improve students' knowledge and also facilitate their self learning. Therefore, applying ICT in teaching and learning has been viewed as an important method for improving the quality of education. In addition, school management nowadays requires ICT usage, so applying ICT in school administration is a must to ensure the smooth communication, accuracy and quickness of school administrative activities.

Spending more on school facility

In low-income countries, increasing spending to provide more textbooks, teaching aids, school facilities and to reduce class size is very crucial to ensuring the quality of education. The Vietnamese Government has increased the budget for education every year and the majority of this spending goes to teacher training, classroom building, and the purchase of computers, books and other school facilities. This strategy has proved to be successful in improving the quality of teaching and learning, resulting in fewer drops out and better outcomes for students. Class size has been reduced from over 50 to 40 or smaller which enables more teacher- student interaction and contributes to the success of the learner center approach of teaching. Most schools are equipped with computers, internet access, projectors, screens, and other kinds of technology. This new equipment promotes more time for teaching preparation and student self learning. Clean water, sanitation and access for disable students are also of great concern and receiving an increasing amount of attention in Vietnam.

Conducting quality assurance practices at all schools

In recent years, the Ministry of Educational and Training in Vietnam has encouraged the use of quality assurance practices among all schools in Vietnam. Regulations on the procedures and the cycle of quality assurance and accreditation among schools were released by the Ministry of Education and Training on December 31, 2008. Quality assurance efforts will be performed at two levels: internal quality assurance through school self assessment and external quality assurance from outsiders. These practices are strongly believed to be able to improve the quality of education at all schools in Vietnam in the years to come.

School leadership

School leaders need to be empowered in order to successfully lead the schools to achieve a high quality of education. Central governments must be ready to give greater freedom to schools, provided that adequate resources are available and that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. School principals then can have a strong influence on the

quality of the schools. In Vietnam, school leadership has been influenced by the central government for a long time and school principals have very little power. However, in recent years, the central government started to give more freedom to the schools and school leaders now can have more influence on school strategic planning process including financial plans and personnel arrangements. However, more autonomy is needed at the school level to ensure better quality of education in the schools.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are different ways to define and measure the quality of education. Whatever way it may be defined, the quality of education always includes the quality of teachers, the quality of the teaching curricula and materials, sufficient school facilities and good administrative leadership. Therefore, to improve the quality of education, teacher training, revising and updating the teaching curricula and materials, improving school facilities and having effective school leadership are no doubt crucial activities. Vietnam has a strong determination to improve the quality of its educational systems in the country. Lots of challenges are ahead, among which include a shortage of qualified teachers and well-trained educational administrators, the heavy work load demanded by the currently used curricula, the low ability of teachers to use ICT in their classrooms and the foreign language ability of school administrators and teachers. Vietnam, being a developing country, struggles because its teachers low in economic status and are overworked attempting to make a living working more than one job, The school facilities and teaching resources are generally insufficient to insure a quality educational experience on the part of the students However, improving quality is always “at the heart” of education and also at the heart of all educational leaders and teachers in Vietnam. We have tried very hard, often with the help of others from outside of the country, to improve the quality of education at all levels in Vietnam by employing the Vietnamese tradition of seeking progress by each careful and difficult step.

Reference

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