Work without name: changing patterns of children’s work in a Northern Vietnamese village

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Introduction

Shortly after gaining independence from France, the new state of Vietnam immediately embarked upon an ambitious campaign to combat hunger and illiteracy. In all likelihood, this campaign timely met the aspirations of the masses for an improvement of their cultural life after almost a century under French rule which had severely curtailed educational developments. Prior to 1945, less than ten per cent of the population were estimated to be literate. Some decades later after the anti-illiteracy movement began, it is estimated that 88 per cent of population are literate (UNICEF 1990:136). This is no doubt a remarkable achievement in mass education. However, nowadays one is witnessing a severe crisis of education brought about by great socio-economic upheavals underway in the country. Available information on the current state of education revealed that the school drop-out rate varied from ten to thirty per cent annually, depending on the levels of schooling and geographical areas. In some provinces, particularly in remote areas, the drop-out rate was even higher, from 40 to 80 per cent of class enrollment. The system of public crèches and kindergartens has almost disappeared in many areas. Worse still, thousands of teaching staff also left school for other jobs (MOET 1992:11). This abnormal state of education is considered "an unstable borderline between status quo and down grading" (Hoang Tuy 1996:3). In some recent reports, a number of causes have been suggested. The first and foremost is the growing economic difficulties of large segments of the population and the lack of concern on the part of the state. Another factor is the school curricula which are deemed not suitable to meet the practical demands of everyday life (Nguyen Trong Bao 1991:5-7; Tran Van Tung 1996:3). Among the reasons for the decline, lack of pupils' efforts and enthusiasm for learning are mentioned (Truong Xuan 1989:4; Pham Tat Dong 1991:17-19). The situation has caught the attention of the country's leadership:

There exists a decline of morality and a vagueness of ideology among a number of pupils and students. In pursuing a materialistic way of life, they lack the will to lead a virtuous life for their own good and the good of their country" (CPV 1997:24).

Less attention has been paid to whether changes of the economic system, labour market demands and children's involvement in work have any impact upon education.
Therefore, such arguments as "difficulties" and "pupil's efforts in study" do not seem convincing if we look back at the long development of public education in Vietnam since its independence from the French. The fact is that economic hardship is nothing new and Vietnam at present remains one of twenty poorest countries of the world (Marr 1988). The situation was much more serious during the war against the Americans. Even then, mass education was already well-developed. Comparative studies on public education indicate that other countries in Asia which bear similarities with Vietnam (India, China, North Korea, etc.), have managed to develop their mass education under even more difficult economic circumstances (Weiner 1991).

The empirical data collected at the village level (Nguyen Van Chinh 1997) and the preliminary nationwide survey reported by the MOLISA (1995) indicate the increasing trend of children's involvement in economic activities, pointing out that their earnings are, in many cases, not just a supplement but an important source of household's incomes. Naturally, the question can be raised as to whether the intensive participation of children in work does in fact prevent them from schooling? It is possible that almost all dropouts would join in the labour market in one form or another, at home, on the farm or elsewhere. However, the right question to be answered is whether these children are absorbed in work so that they are not able to go to school or vice versa? Further research should address not only children's work but also the attitudes of children and their parents vis-à-vis the education system and, on a wider context, general public opinion towards education.

Previously, I have pointed out that the high dropout rate at early ages might be attributed to the inappropriate school curricula which did not meet the realistic needs of the learners. From a "functionalist" point of view, one would expect that the school should be able to provide the necessary technical skills for the pupils. This functionalism has underlined, at least in theory, past policies on education in Vietnam, to the effect that most discussions and educational reforms in this country for more than 40 years now have been aimed at "integrating theory and practice, theory and productive labour" in the school system.\footnote{Such kinds of argument can be found in a number of leadership speeches and documents regarding education. See, for instance, Ho Chi Minh 1990; The Communist Party of Vietnam 1979, 1993, 1997.} This guideline of education has not, however, been applied faithfully in the school system as admitted by the Party itself (CPV 1997:26). The fact remains that in everyday school life, "the years of childhood are also seen as being primarily a time of study, i.e., theory" (Rubin, 1988:46). This is in line with historical comparative studies on worldwide education, which suggest that "the content of most modern education is not very practical, education attainment correlates poorly with work performance", and "schooling does not supply specific technical skills" (Green 1990:38).
Another approach to explain the vagaries in school enrollment is to study the attitudes and motivations of both parents and pupils as regards education. Negative attitudes and a low level of motivation would not only lead to a drop in school enrollment but lower the quality of education as well (Pham Tat Dong 1991; CPV 1997). Such an approach, in my view, does not seem to reflect fully the nature of the educational situation because it does not take into account the social aspects of education.

In reality, it is hard to say that demand for education is decreasing, viewed from both perspectives of private and public demands. Socially, Vietnamese has a long tradition of veneration for educational ethics (ton su trong dao), where "education retains tremendous prestige" and "those among them who memorize large quantities of data, achieve top marks, and receive diplomas or degrees, will be honored with high social status" (Marr 1996;19). At present, recent changes in the economic system has created a wealth of opportunities for higher educated graduates. Industrialization and reconstruction after long years of war demand a great number of a well trained workforce. For obvious reasons, the State would benefit a great deal from developing a sound educational system. Theoretically, the popular thirst for education should remain the same, if not increase, under the present circumstances.

The problem is how can one explain the reverse trend in the development of education in Vietnam during the last decade? This question was uppermost in my mind during my field research in Giao village. At the beginning, I was inclined to think that the intensive involvement of children in economic activities was one of the main reasons behind their leaving school at an early age. Therefore it came as a total surprise when many pupils and their parents told me that it was not work but the depressing state of education that made young children leave school for good. As a consequence, I had to revise my research strategy, trying to look into the dynamic linkages between the child, the state and socio-economic changes to see how and whether these factors did influence upon the school system. My findings suggest that it is the rapidly evolving socio-economic environment, including the labour market, and the state of the school system itself that made parents hesitate at the crossroads of choice regarding their children's future, between education and work. And more often than not, they opt for a reluctant decision that allows their children to leave school early and join the labour force. It seems to me that decisions concerning children's education that appear as individual actions stem primarily from a wider context of social change. As a starting point, I shall attempt to outline the major trends of dropouts at a national level. I will then focus on the local school of Luong Dien where the field research was undertaken.

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88 In the context of Vietnam, education is considered as being part of superstructure, and a manifestation of state care.
Dropouts

While one may consider class repeat a rather normal occurrence in school life which may vary from year to year, the fact that substantial numbers unexpectedly leave school before finishing the required levels is a serious problem that deserves a close inspection. Available statistics on education indicate that such a phenomenon already began since the early 1980's when several economic reforms were introduced in the agricultural sector and collective production was replaced by the "output contract system" (*che do khoan*). Increasing dropout rate occurred at all three levels of general education (primary, secondary and upper secondary schools) and reached a peak in the academic year of 1990-1991. These statistics particularly indicate that the majority of dropouts were at the lower secondary level, among pupils between 12 to 16 years of age.

Looking at the enrollment statistics of the primary level (age group between six and twelve), we may see an actual increase in school attendance, from 8.1 million in the school year of 1981-82 to 8.9 million in 1990-91. However, the increase of enrollment for this age group between 1981 and 1991 was only 1.1 percent per year while annual population growth was 1.4 per cent during the same period. This means that dropout must occur at the primary school.

As statistics indicated, dropout rates were already high at the very first grade of primary school, decrease somewhat at grades two, three and four and climbed again at grade five, the last grade of primary school (MOET 1994:11-12). High dropout at grade 1 can be attributed to the collapse of pre-school system (kindergarten and creche) in many areas since decollectivisation, where agricultural cooperatives were no longer able to take care of these pre-schools, therefore depriving children of the necessary preparations to enter primary school.

Statistics also indicate the highest dropout rates occur at the secondary level as compared to the primary level. Between the school years of 1981-82 and 1990-91, enrollment at lower secondary school decreases by 14.8 per cent and at higher secondary school by 25.3 per cent. 91

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89 'Dropout', as used in this study, refers to the pupils, for various reasons, left school before finishing a required level.
90 In January 1981, CPV permitted cooperatives to assign rice fields to individual households for farming, known as *Contract 100*. According to this, the household was allowed to keep products which produced beyond the level that they contractually obligated to turn over to the cooperative.
91 In the school year of 1981-1982, there were 3,170,000 pupils attending the secondary school and 710,000 attending higher secondary school. In the school year of 1990-1991, these numbers were 2,700,000 and 530,000 (Tran Kiem, in MOET, 1994:11-12).
The high dropout rates in recent years have changed the composition of school attendance within the general education system in which the number of secondary school pupils has dropped considerably. As reported by the Ministry of Education, among 100 pupils entering primary school, only 30 would continue to the low secondary and just 6 to higher secondary level (MOET 1994:12). The dropout rate varied considerably according to geographical areas. For instance, in the school year of 1989-1990, the dropout rate in Hanoi was 5.05 per cent at the primary level and 12.96 per cent at the secondary level while these rates were much higher in rural areas (see the annex to chapter 8).

Although data on education during the 1990s show an increase at a certain rate at primary and lower secondary levels, available statistics also indicate an unequal access to education for the poor children. According to the Vietnam Living Standards Survey 1992-1993, the lowest literacy rate is in the quintile one (poorest), increasing over quintiles and highest in the quintile five (SPC-GSO 1994:17). As indicated by statistics, the aggregate enrollment rates mark significant differences between income groups. These statistics tend to show that while the poorest group could manage to send their children to primary school, only a few were able to make it to secondary levels and remarkably, none of them was at the tertiary institutions. It is no doubt that costs to the family were the main reasons to explain why most poorer children fail to get beyond the primary school, which were required to pay official tuition fees under the 1990 educational law. The survey results also point out that while in quintile one (poorest), the average annual education expenditure per pupil was just 37.13 thousand dong, the quintile five spent 314.62 thousand dong annually, which is more than eight times more (SPC-GSO 1994:18).

While educational statistics at the national level indicate a high dropout rate and a decrease in school enrollment, particularly at the secondary levels, data collected at the district level also reveal the same trend. The annual report by the Department of Education in Cam Binh district of which Giao village is a part shows a common decrease in school enrollment was 12.3 per cent between the school year of 1977-78 and 1990-91. At the secondary level, the decrease was more severe, about 36 per cent.

At the school of Luong Dien where this field research was conducted, available statistics similarly point to a declining trend in school attendance (see Table 8.1).

Table one shows the situation of school enrollment in Luong Dien commune between 1985 and 1994. During these nine years, primary school enrollment increased only by 1.05 per cent while secondary school enrollment decreased by 31.5 per cent. Additionally, statistics on school attendance in Luong Dien commune seem to indicate a decrease of girls in both school levels (see Table 8.2). Their low ratio vis-as-vis boys in
school enrollment perhaps reflect not only a high girl drop-out rate but also a high possibility of their involvement in work.

Table 8.1. Number of school attendants at the school of Luong Dien commune, 1985 - 1991 (net number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Primary level</th>
<th>Secondary level</th>
<th>% of sec. pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985 - 86</td>
<td>1614</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986 - 87</td>
<td>1539</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987 - 88</td>
<td>1572</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988 - 89</td>
<td>1566</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 90</td>
<td>1527</td>
<td>1217</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 - 91</td>
<td>1598</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 - 92</td>
<td>1587</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 - 93</td>
<td>1512</td>
<td>1211</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 - 94</td>
<td>1525</td>
<td>1188</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Annual Reports by the Department of Education*, Cam Binh district archives.

Note: Population of age group between 5 and 14 in Luong Dien Commune in 1989 was 2,304 persons, (TCTK 1989, Table 1-3:457).

Table 8.2. Proportion of girl pupils at the school of Luong Dien (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School years</th>
<th>Girl ratio</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985 - 86</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986 - 87</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987 - 88</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988 - 89</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 90</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 - 91</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 - 92</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992 - 93</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 - 94</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Annual Reports by Department of Education*, Cam Binh district archives.

Note: Ratio male/female of age group between 5 and 14 in Luong Dien commune was 49% in 1989 (The 1989 Census, Table 1-3:457).

The decline of the primary pupils entering the secondary school and common dropouts suggest that qualitative data are needed to understand the question of why children left school.

**Leaving school for good?**

As mentioned earlier, the vagaries of the education situation in recent years lead to general remarks such as decline in motivation and efforts among pupils or they have
been spoiled by "bad habits brought about by a "market economy", etc. These judgments are, however, rarely based on opinions of children themselves. In an attempt to understand the depressed state of education and children's attitudes towards education, I used a simple set of questions by asking schoolchildren: 1) Why do you go to school?; 2) After attending classes, what do you do (based on activities during the past few days)?; 3) To which level do you want to continue your schooling, how do you feel about your own life at present (happiness, sadness, hardship, etc.) and what do you wish for your future?

I then asked pupils attending grade five up to grade nine at the school of Luong Dien to answer these questions in the form of a short essay. From this sample, 116 essays were collected and analyzed. Surprisingly, children's opinions were not in line with those expressed by adults. I will try to quantify briefly the results of this survey in the table below.

Table 8.3. Pupils' motivations and desired levels for schooling in Luong Dien, 1995 (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations of schooling</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Age of 11-13</th>
<th>Age of 14-16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. to avoid odd jobs</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. parents force to go to school</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. to enjoy being with friends</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. to escape from rural life</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. to enrich knowledge</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. to have a good future</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Levels of schooling wanted
- Secondary                        | 15.6  | 15.1 | 16.3  | 20.5         | 3.0          |
- Higher secondary                | 54.4  | 46.6 | 67.4  | 50.5         | 63.7         |
- University                      | 17.3  | 25.0 | 7.0   | 12.0         | 33.3         |
- Don't know                      | 12.1  | 13.3 | 9.0   | 17.0         | 0.0          |

Source: Sample survey conducted in Luong Dien, 1995.
Number of pupils who gave answers: 116 (73 boys and 43 girls), broken down as follows: pupils aged 11-13: 83 (48 boys and 35 girls); pupils aged 14-16: 33 (25 boys and 8 girls).

Initial results show that pupils at this rural school were not averse to schooling, in fact, far from it. Remarkably, 87 per cent wished to follow up to higher levels, more than 54 per cent wanted to finish the high secondary school and 17 per cent wanted to enter universities. This rate was even higher in the group of older children (63 per cent and 33 per cent). However, it is clear that more boys wanted to enter universities than girls (25 per cent as compared to 7 per cent). Those who said "don't know" (12 per cent) further explained that this is a matter for their parents to decide.

Secondly, "motivations for schooling" reflect pupils' general perception that education is a stepping stone to a better future (88 per cent). The desire for education was more clearly expressed among pupils attending higher grades (97 per cent).
Thirdly, there was a considerable number of the pupils (51 per cent) who said that going to school is a means to escape from rural life. This rate was higher in the older age group (69 per cent). This tends to reflect the dissatisfaction of older children with their present life.

Additionally, the survey points to the fact that the great majority of pupils were actively engaged in work (at home, on the farm and in non-farm activities elsewhere) after attending classes. However, it is worth noting that only about 26 per cent of pupils wanted to spend after-school time for earning money while more than 61 per cent wanted to use it for doing home work.

From this survey it emerges that most school children realized they could not expect a bright future if they were to leave school early. This perception seems, however, to contradict the fact that only a small percentage of pupils did go on to a higher level of education. During the 1978 - 1985 period, the number of children attending the last grade of the secondary level at the commune's school remained rather constant, ranging from 150 to 200. However, this number dropped sharply during the 1990 - 1995 period, fluctuating between 15 and 35. What explanations the children gave about their dropping out? To get more insight in this issue, I shall now return to the children of Giao village.

From a total of 155 children aged between eight and fifteen under the sample, 51 per cent had left school to work. None of them finished lower secondary school, except one boy still attending grade 8 at the school of Luong Dien. I noticed that most children who worked as part-time apprentices in local wood carving workshops had no time to do any homework, and they were often late getting to school. Some of them stayed away for fear of failing their exams or being scolded by their teachers. During my year staying at the village, I interviewed 79 dropouts as to why did they leave school and what did they feel about their decision. The answers I received are summarized as follows:

1. Parents asked them to stop schooling for good.
2. Parents were not able to afford tuition and other costs.
3. Influence of friends.
4. Dislike of teachers.
5. Ill-treatment by teachers.
7. School attendance hindered by wood-carving apprenticeship.
8. Desire to earn money.
9. Wish to be independent from the parents.

10. Wish to help parents in alleviating family's hardship.

11. No possible means for continuing study.

The above responses can be grouped into two sets of factors, which I shall call 'external' and 'internal'. The external factors, which have a direct bearing on the pupils' everyday life, include: 1) family, 2) school system and 3) friends. The internal factors basically consist of motivations and attitudes of the pupils themselves, based on their personal experiences and views on educational merits. These may partly play a role determining the propensity to drop out among individual pupils.

In the following sections of this chapter, I shall attempt to analyze how the external factors impact upon school dropping out. My field work indicates that most dropouts did so reluctantly and regretted afterwards, and only a few returned to school after one or two years. Most dropouts said they would like to come back to school again but they felt "too old" vis-à-vis their classmates, adding that what little knowledge they had acquired was gone for good. It is worth mentioning that alternative forms of education were virtually non-existent for these young dropouts.

As a prelude to bring the light into next discussions, I would like to quote herewith a short account of one of my interviews with Tien, a dropout.

**Question:** At which level of schooling did you drop out?

**Answer:** Half way through grade 5.

**Q:** Why did you drop out?

**A:** Because of a Pioneer's scarf.

**Q:** How? Could you tell me your story?

**A:** One day I came to school without my Pioneer's scarf. My teacher did not allow me to enter the classroom. I didn't remember where I lost my scarf. That day, I had visited my aunt in the neighbouring village before going to school. I must have lost it on my way to school. Next day, I came to school again without my red scarf. Miss Van, the teacher, decided to punish me by asking Hung, the class leader, to whip me in front of my classmates. She said I had done great harm to the reputation of our class in the school's competition for excellence. She decided that from now on I could not come back without my Pioneer's scarf. I dared not tell my mother about this because I didn't want to worry her. Next day I left home at school-time but I did not go there. I was so fed up. Since then, I never went back.

**Q:** How did your mum react to your dropping out?

**A:** She was upset. She cried and told me that since I am her only son, I should come back to school, and that she and my sisters could bear the costs for me to go on studying. But I refused and took up wood carving with my uncle.

**Q:** You intend to make a living with wood carving?

**A:** I know that with a low level of education, there is not much of a future for me. My mother always says the same thing. Some friends of mine were forced by their parents to return to school. I still feel regret to have dropped out. But I am so fed up with school. Besides my family is so poor. If I go on to higher school, I will become a heavy burden for my mother and my sisters. You see, a lot of people with university diplomas have now returned to the village and

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92 As regulated by the school system, all Pioneers Association members have to wear the Pioneer's scarf when going to school.
At the crossroads of choice

By mentioning 'choice', I do not intend to emphasize individual motivations of pupils and their parents concerning the question of 'work or education', which are common topics of daily conversations among Giao villagers. It is my interest however to gain insight into what is on the minds of these parents when they ponder about their children's education and their future against the backdrop of their own experiences when they themselves were still boys and girls in the village. Answering some of these questions may enable us to understand the prevalent popular attitudes towards education in the present-day context.

A sense of the past

There has been little doubt about the pivotal role of education in traditional Vietnamese society. For many centuries, together with the consolidation of Confucianism as a state doctrine in Vietnam, the educational system was expanded from the central level down to the grass roots. That examinations were held at regular intervals to select meritorious candidates among the masses to serve the country's administration at various levels was a testimony to the importance the state in feudal times attached to education. The aim of this educational system was to propagate Confucian ethics and, most importantly, to recruit qualified civil servants, generally called mandarins in former times, for the state's administration (Dao Duy Anh 1937:23-35; Vu Ngoc Khanh 1985:88-89; Nguyen Dang Tien 1993:14-16). Those with a high level of knowledge but unsuccessful in examinations might end up as village teachers whose task was to teach children "the way of a real man" (cach lam nguoi). The old values of education were still widespread among the rural communities, as shown by this popular saying:

You had better give your child some books
Rather than bequeath him a bag of gold

Although these village schools were not open for everyone and not every pupil could aspire to a mandarin career, having their children "scrape up a little knowledge" had been a dear wish for many Vietnamese parents through the ages.

93 A cross-check with Tien's old classmates and his mother confirmed the story. At present (1995), Tien was a boy of 15 years of age. His father died a few years ago by an accident. He lived with his mother and two sisters in the village. He worked as a wood carver and his average earnings were about 600,000 dong per month. The villagers said he was one of the youngest carvers who got such high wages.
Under the colonial regime, the district of Cam Giang which included Giao village, had just one district school, ten canton schools and fourteen village schools with an enrollment of about 1,000 pupils. Giao village had one school, called "village teacher's school" (truong huong su), with 17 pupils (Ngo Vi Lien 1931:16-17).\(^{94}\)

Another popular form of basic education at the village level was holding classes at home, lop hoc tai gia (tutorials at home) as well-to-do families invited a teacher to stay at their houses and to teach the children basic classical Chinese. The anti-illiteracy campaign launched by the revolutionary government shortly after 1945 opened new opportunities for educational developments and despite two wars (1946-1954 and 1954-1975), the number of children attending school in Cam Binh increased rapidly, up to 90 per cent of the age group between eight and fourteen in 1979 (TCTK 1981:176-177). As many older villagers now still remember, they felt a great joy going to school, even though classes were conducted underground, in shelters or at the village pagoda. This craving for learning has left a strong imprint on the minds of the people, as born out by popular attitudes to this day: 1) Educated people enjoy high esteem in society; 2) Good education and a high diploma are windows of opportunity to important jobs in the state administration; 3) Intellectual work is often regarded as the most important occupation.

These attitudes have been condemned by modern educationalists as obsolete reflections of "feudal" ways of thinking:

Our pupils, as well as many others in our society, have been obsessed with the idea that once they start school, they should go on and on to the highest levels of the school system. Their only goal is to get a position in the state administration: to become a mandarin in the feudal period, a high civil servant under the colonial regime and in our times, a cadre. Failing this, they would be regarded worthless persons, to be looked down upon by fellow villagers and society" (Former Vice Minister of Education Nguyen Khanh Toan, 1995:92).

The fact remains that going to school for a chance to enter the "state affairs", meaning getting a civil service job, has been on the people's minds for centuries. In Giao village, I often heard comparisons between schooling under the 'subsidy system' and today's education. Villagers recalled young people in their village who had higher education were highly respected and often landed with good jobs as state cadres. Their livelihood and their children's future were thus secure. "Nowadays you'll have to bear all the costs to send a kid to school, but there is no guarantee of a job", they contended. A highly respected villager explained to me: "If you know that your children have a chance to become a cadre, to escape from hard, rural life, you will do all you can to send them to school. Otherwise, why should you go through all the troubles?"

\(^{94}\)According to Ngo Vi Lien, the chief of district during the early 1930s, the total population of Cam Giang in 1931 was 45,175 persons. If we estimate the school age group (between 5 and 19 year old) was about 30 per cent of the total population, the number of school attendants in Cam Giang district would be eight per cent of
The risk of education

Juggling between the pros and cons of schooling was not a real problem under the subsidy economic system. Determined to train "new people" for socialism, the state took full charge of providing education facilities for the masses. In rural areas, the agricultural co-operatives were responsible for the local school system: kindergarten, creche, primary and secondary schools. Education during this period was regarded as a part of social welfare and a showpiece of socialism. Schooling was free of charge and one had not to worry about the costs of education. Graduates were taken in by the state-run sectors where they could find not only jobs but also respect.

The change from a free to a costly education forced the peasants to rethink about their children's schooling. And as it often occurs, the pressure of a hard existence generally makes them opt for a "short-run benefit" course instead of a "long-term investment" alternative. As a villager confidentially told me:

I have two sons, both attending school. That costs me at least 50 thousand dong each month for tuition fees, books and so on. Apart from these, I have to feed them, buy them medicines when they're sick, give them pocket money. If I continue to invest in their higher education when they get to the age of 17 or 18 year of age, the costs will run into millions of dong, but then what for? If they can get into university, I'll have to feed them for four or five years more, something we cannot afford. And there's no guarantee of a job. That'll be a disaster. Now, suppose my two sons stop school at the age of 11 or 12 and take up wood carving at a workshop in the village. During one or two years of training, they won't cost me a cent. Instead they can earn enough for themselves. And if they're good at their jobs, they may bring an extra income to the family, say half a million dong per month. When they get to the age, say, of 17 or 18, they can have their own career as carvers. Think of this, I cannot take further risks in keeping them longer at school. (Interviews with Vu D.T., age 45, in May 1995).

Alternative options

Under the collective regime, peasants had little choice but to work on the co-operative farm. Except for a few non-farm activities (handicrafts and services) organized by the co-operative, labour was mainly utilized in the agricultural sector. Only a small proportion of the work force was employed in the state-run sectors. For children, going to school was the natural thing to do. The transformation since economic reforms

that age group, (Ngo Vi Lien, 1931:13-17).

95 According to the Directive No.26/CT/UBND (Hai Hung province), financial support for education at commune level were from following sources:
1. the socio-cultural fund of the commune: 10%.
2. the agricultural cooperative: 30% in cash and 40% in paddy.
3. the public welfare fund of credit co-operative: 15 to 20%.
4. Agricultural co-operative is responsible in mobilizing welfare public labor (lao dong cong ich) for building the school facilities (Ban Quan li HTXNN Hai Hung 1986).
has likely brought about great changes. While farming still remains the major activity, other non-farm activities such as small scale industries and family handicrafts, have created new sources of income for rural families. Labour force has been channeled more and more into non-farm activities, facilitated by the fact that costs for training is not crucial because cottage industries are being revived from traditional crafts, and new trainees are directly involved in the production process. High wages offered in these activities serve as a magnet to attract more and more labour. A professional carver's earnings are considerably higher than fixed wages of a university teacher, a scientific researcher, or a medical doctor employed by the state. For instance, the monthly wage of a wood carver ranged from 400 thousand to one million dong compared to just under 200 thousand dong for a new university graduate paid by state-owned sectors.

Together with changes in the local labour market, the public attitude towards materialistic values has dramatically changed. Before the so-called "market economy" was introduced, children were kept away from earning money because money was considered as something that can demean human values. This attitude has now been turned around as "to avoid from being demeaned, one needs money!" (Hanh Nhu 1992:6). Making money, something of a taboo under the old collective regime, was now totally respectable. This was one of the key factors in parents' decision to cut short their children's education and send them to work.

Other important factors influencing parents' attitude towards schooling for their children were the limited access to middle and higher education and a high rate of unemployment among university graduates. In the school year of 1994-1995, there were 230,000 pupils applying for higher secondary school in Hai Hung province but the school system could admit only 140,000 (about 60 per cent). Meanwhile, access to university entrance was even more stringent. Some 100 universities and colleges nationwide could only admit between five to ten per cent of the applicants every year (Tran Hong Quan 1995, see also Marr 1988).

Despite rather low wages, unemployment among university graduates has been rising at an alarming rate, from 10.7 per cent in 1988, 20.3 per cent in 1990 and climbing up to 41.7 per cent in 1992 (Pham Tat Dong 1995:99). This reality is realized by many young people in rural areas, as one youngster in Giao village told me:

After dropping out, I often missed my former school, friends and teachers. It took me several months to get them out of my mind. I deeply regret having quit. But I know that if I continued to study, I would be unemployed, like my brother who after his graduation from the university, returned to village to work as a carver. There is no difference between a well-educated man and a boy with little education. This is a consolation for me with what I'm doing now (interviews with Quyen, 16 years of age).
It is this harshness of life that has given rise to a saying often cited by the village children in defending their materialistic pursuits: *Van hay chu tot khong bang thang dot lam tien* (a well educated man is worth less than an illiterate with a lot of money).

**Sharing a community life**

While observing the state of education in Giao village, I found that dropping out occurred as something of a chain reaction. From discussions I held with a number of parents and children, it seems that popular opinion around the village had an important role in influencing their decisions whether to continue or quit schooling, particularly with the case of Giao where every one is connected to each other through an intricate system of relationships. This notion occurred to me only after I had participated in a number of meetings, visits, meals and feasts held in private and public places, among the close villagers with whom I could share confidences. As a rule, the villagers always had their comments and judgments about every event that happening, based on their own thinking and they needed to share them with someone else. And as I noticed, among many other subjects of village life, children's education and their earning activities often appeared as a topical topic of idle conversations at leisure time. Although such kinds of "public opinion' were not directly addressed to anyone, they functioned like a "network of understanding and practice" within the village (Scott 1985:300). To consider this aspect of village life with respect to education of the children, two cases will be referred.

**Case 1**

The Vu is a respectable family in Giao village. Mr Vu is a veteran who served in the army for more than 15 years. He now has returned to the village and works as a farmer. Vu's wife is a village teacher. They have four children, all attending school. He told me that he did not want his children to leave school so early as others did, so he sent his eldest daughter to a secondary school in the town of Hai Duong, some 20 kms away from Giao. The reason for this "is to get her away from the bad influence of the village dropouts so she could concentrate on her study". His retirement pension could barely cover her study costs. In May 1995, he sold one ton of paddy-- a year's earnings from hard work on the farm-- to enable his daughter to go to Hanoi to take the university entrance examinations. After two months, he received the bad news: his daughter had failed the exams!

The fact is that if a girl fails at an university entrance examination, it is quite normal in the city. But in a village like Giao, this gives rise to much discussion and is a topic for gossip. Some people commented that Mr Vu did not know what he was doing. Why didn't he marry her off to some village boy like all the rest? Maybe he felt superior to his fellow villagers in sending his daughter to Hanoi. Others speculated perhaps his daughter was no longer suitable
for the village boys (meaning she was no longer a virgin), so he had to send her to the big city!
But "with such little money (just about 1.5 million dong, equivalent to one ton of paddy), how
could he expect to buy a place for his daughter in Hanoi?" Some villagers even came to me (I
was known as a teacher from Hanoi university) and asked whether one could buy a place at the
university and how much would this cost!

Such gossips were quite rampant among the villagers. Mr Vu was a bit depressed about
these stories, needless to say. He told me he had no ambition to turn his daughter into a 'lady',
just that he wanted his daughter to get on in life in a decent manner. Now he didn't want to
attend meetings and feasts and even avoided friends and relatives, afraid that people would
harass him about what happened about his daughter.

**Case 2**

Mr Van and his wife had been poor farmers in Giao village. From his parents they
inherited a small cottage on a barren piece of land in the middle of the village. With 8 children
to feed, their life was really hard. Because he could not afford to pay for their education costs,
he decided to send his three sons to a wood workshop in the village when they were quite
young. After a few years of training, the three sons followed some of the villagers to Ho Chi
Minh city to look for a job. With a bit of luck, two of them landed in a workshop financed by
foreign money. Every month each son could send home about 600 thousand dong. After two
years, Mr Van was able to build up a big house on his own land. He was able to purchase prized
consumer goods such as an electronic fan, a cassette recorder etc. and even threw in a big
house-warming party. His sons told friends that within a year they would buy a new Honda
motorbike.

That a poor man like Mr Van could build a new big house sent a shock wave around the
village. Mothers took up Mr Van's example to tell their children: "Just look at your neighbour's
kids. They're about your age and they already earn enough money to build a house for their
parents. What have you done for us then in return for all we've done in bringing you up?"

Adults in the village now started telling that Mr Van's sons had golden hands, they
were the "darlings of their Japanese employers', and that Mr Van was lucky for the blessings
from his ancestors. Meanwhile village kids began to wonder: "If they could make a lot of
money, why not us?" Many began leaving school and tried their luck in Ho Chi Minh city,
though none of them achieved their dream of helping their parents to build a new house.

**An education of obedience**

In this section, I shall attempt to point out the vagaries of the current state of
education in rural Vietnam. In arguing that while rapid socio-economic changes create a
"shock syndrome" forcing peasants to re-arrange their life strategies, the educational
system has proved to be 'dry and rigid' in its teaching contents and methods, which in
turn has a deleterious effect on both parents and pupils. To support this line of
argument, I will focus my observations on the school of Luong Dien with respect to: 1)
material conditions of school, 2) integration of educational contents and 3) current teaching methods.

The school

From a historical perspective, general education in Luong Dien commune has achieved considerable success. The first time in 1959, a primary school was officially established in this commune with 15 teachers. In the first school year, there were 209 pupils, attending grades one up to four (DBLD 1993:83). Classes were mainly conducted on the premises of the village pagoda and commune house. Until 1963, there were only nine modest classrooms built with contributions from the local population. In the school year of 1965-1966, a low secondary school was set up with a teaching staff of five. However, shortly after this, classes had again to be held at the pagoda and the communal house to avoid American bombing and then only returned to their original premises in the 1973-74 school year. By then the old school had become a semi-ruin, in dire need of maintenance. Despite all this Luong Dien school has continued to grow and was awarded with the honorific title of 'merit of socialist labour' for its success (DBLD 1993:116).

At present, the school of Luong Dien has been rebuilt and greatly enlarged. Apart from a few classrooms held within villages, it now boasts 2 two-storied buildings with 12 classrooms and three brick houses with six classrooms. It takes the children about 20 minutes to walk from Giao village to the school located in the middle of the commune. In the village itself there are some classes for young children at the first grade (six or seven years old). For those attending higher secondary school, which now falls under the provincial administration, they have to travel to the district township, 12 km away from Giao village.

The Luong Dien school becomes particularly isolated from the villages during the rainy season, because it stands in the middle of vast rice fields, and often gives an impression of being an island out of nowhere. Some teachers compared their school with 'Siberia' because it takes some courage to venture out to the school on rainy days.

According to the school headmaster, Luong Dien has never had enough space for all its pupils for many years. In the school year of 1994-1995, there were 36 classes of primary level (from grade one to five) but only 30 classrooms were available. There

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96 Expenditures for building school in 1963 were 11,582 dong in which people contributed 7,350 dong, 600 bamboo trees and wood, and 850 labor days, the rest costs supported by the state (DBLD, 1993:96).

97 The first two-storied building was built in 1989 with a total expense of 180,000,000 dong, a major part came from OXFAM. Another two-storied building was built in 1992 with a total cost of 220,000,000 dong. The fund came from the provincial government and contribution of local people.

98 As reported, it takes rural children an average time of 18 minutes for primary pupils, 22 minutes for
were 13 classes at secondary level but the school had only 12 classrooms. Because of this, six classes at the primary level had to be held on three shifts while one class at the secondary level was conducted in the cramped space under the staircase. Though the school was newly built, many of its windows had already been broken or disappeared, so that pupils often had to suffer from the cold during the winter. Most classrooms lack proper desks and benches. Sometimes pupils had to sit on the floor during class hours.

Most often the necessary number of teachers for both levels (primary and secondary) was not adequately met according to standard regulation. In fact, the primary level lacked five teachers while the secondary level needs eight more teachers. Because of this shortage, teachers of Luong Dien school often had to teach 39 hours per week instead of 20 hours as regulated by the Ministry of Education. Some teachers of natural sciences had to take over social science subjects which are not their speciality.

Just nine years ago, this school had a good library where teachers and pupils could come and read books and newspapers. Poor pupils could even borrow text books from this library. It no longer exists today. As the school headmaster explained to me, the budget for the library had been cut off while the staff were asked to look for other jobs. And since the contents of text-books changed so often together with educational reforms, pupils were advised to buy new books instead of borrowing old ones.

Teaching equipment were rarely used. Teachers of physics, chemistry, geography and technology called such a teaching method "day chay", meaning that one gives the children food without meat or fish. Apart from the shortage of teaching equipment, the general standard of Luong Dien school is considered to be better than average compared to other similar schools in the region.

**Curriculum**

According to a directive issued by the Ministry of Education, the number of compulsory subjects and extra-curricular activities at the primary level are 12 and 19 at the secondary level (Pham Minh Hac 1992:62-66). In reality, the teaching program at Luong Dien school was solely concentrated on the core subjects while neglecting other activities due to shortage of teachers. Besides this standard curriculum, much flexibility is allowed to suit the local situation. Subjects such as agricultural techniques, physical education/hygiene and foreign languages were taught in a rudimentary manner while

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99 The shortage of teachers was not the specific case of Luong Dien. In the whole country, primary schools lacked about 60,000 teachers (Tran Hong Quan, 1995:93).
others were mostly overlooked. Among the compulsory subjects, Vietnamese and mathematics are highly rated because they are major examination topics.

The number of instruction hours at school regulated by MOET is 32 hours per week for primary level and 38 hours per week for secondary level. In reality, primary pupils in Luong Dien spent an average of 16 hours per week at school while secondary pupils spent an average of 20 hours per week. Despite MOET regulation that Thursday is free, the pupils of Luong Dien school were required to attend extra classes on Thursdays (*hoc them*) and they had to pay 8000 dong extra per month for this.

Table 8.4. Compulsory subjects and their implementation in Luong Dien school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects/Activities</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural and social sciences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign language(s)*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical exercise/military training</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts (drawing, music, handicrafts)*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salute the national flag (the first day every week)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic activities*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive labour*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total hours of instruction/week</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Those subjects with asterisk (*) were not really taught at Luong Dien School.
Source: Own survey

Generally speaking, apart from doing practical chores such as gardening and cleaning, children spend the greatest part of their school hours studying in the classroom. With an average of just three hours of lessons per school day, they have to spend much more time in order to learn each subject properly. A large part of study

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100 At the school of Luong Dien, foreign languages were taught from the school year of 1993-1994 at the secondary level. In 1995, there was only one teacher of English who had to teach 13 classes with more than 300 pupils.

101 A survey conducted by General Statistical Office reports that pupils of rural schools in the region of the Red River delta spent an average 16 to 22 hours per week at school, see T.C.T.K. 1994:23.
program is geared towards home-work but my observation indicated that most pupils had not enough time to do this.

The average school day for a pupil, apart from attending normal hours listening to the teacher's instruction, includes the following activities: 1) Lining up for checking personal hygiene, proper clothing and absentees, 2) Cross-check among pupils on homework (before teachers begin with new lessons), 3) Collective singing before and between classes, 4) Physical exercise between classes.

At both levels of primary and secondary, the school organized the so-called 'lop chon' (chosen classes) in which gifted pupils were selected to follow special classes taught by good teachers. The purpose of these chosen classes is to train excellent pupils for competitive examinations at district, provincial and national levels. A few gifted pupils on special subjects were asked to attend specialized schools (truong chuyen) organized by the district where intensive programs on literature, mathematics or sciences were designed for them.

Besides their normal teaching duty, some teachers also organized additional tutorials (lop day them) to earn extra incomes. Previously, such extra teaching often took place during the summer holidays to help those pupils who fell behind in their regular school work. Recently, additional tutorials mainly in Vietnamese and mathematics were privately given by the teachers themselves and these prove to be quite popular. These extra classes were geared towards helping pupils to pass qualifying exams at different levels. Pupils who attended these tutorials are expected to pay extra fees directly to the teachers. Only a limited number of pupils followed such tutorials arranged voluntarily between teachers and those parents who could afford these. Those pupils who did not attend these additional tutorials told me they felt at a handicap vis-à-vis their classmates on such occasions.102

School life

Pupils and teachers themselves often talked about their school life as something "dry and rigid". To gain more insight on their teaching and studying, this section will examine three major aspects of Luong Dien school with respect to 1) Organisation of the class, 2) method of teaching 3) relationships between teachers and pupils. These may

102 According to Pham Minh Hac, former Minister of Education, the Council of Ministers issued the Decree No.15 QD/CP (1981) allowing teachers to organize the additional tutorials beside compulsory classes (Pham 1990:1). In May 1993, Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet decided to prohibit all forms of additional tutorial within public schools and forbid teachers using different manners to push pupils taking part in their private tutorials (Cong Bao 15/8/1993:37).
be helpful in explaining why school curriculum and school life in general have been considered as 'dry and rigid' in the eyes of so many pupils.

At this school, the average size of a class was 35 pupils. Each class was run by a teacher called *giao vien chu nhiem* (teacher in charge). The teacher was responsible for all educational activities of his/her class, ranging from monitoring the academic progress to moral behaviour of individual pupils. The teacher also had to maintain close contact with the parents, and was responsible for coordinating a wide range of activities of a collective nature.

The teacher in charge would appoint a class leader (sometimes elected by the pupils themselves) who was to assist him/her in running the daily activities of the class. The class was further divided into several groups, placed under the supervision of group leaders whose tasks were to make sure members would do their homework and carry out assigned duties in a proper manner. Competition among the groups was encouraged to achieve satisfactory results.

The Communist Youth League and the Pioneer Association were the important organizations within the school system whose membership was open only to "good" pupils.

Pupils were required to pay full attention to their teacher during class hours. At the end of a class, the teacher assigned homework to be prepared for the next class. During the classes there was hardly any open discussion between teachers and pupils. Teachers rarely attempted to stimulate curiosity or search for creative ideas among pupils who for the most part remained passive.

During a normal school year, pupils had to take a series of tests and sit at two qualifying examinations during Autumn and Spring terms in order to move up to a higher class. Academic performance alone was not the sole criteria because the final saying rested with the teacher in judging the pupils' "moral character".

Although physical punishment has been officially banned but in practice, many forms of punishment still existed, ranging from corvee labour, beating, enforced isolation or to exposure to the sun for long duration.

At the school as well as at home, the pupils were taught to show respect to their teachers. Teachers often display an aloofness towards their pupils who in turn behaved in a passive and dependent manner. At a societal level, teachers have always been the subject of veneration as emphasized by the motto *Tien Hoc Le, Hau Hoc Van*, which means that "learn the rites first, then acquire the knowledge".103

103 This Confucian ethics date back from feudal times. During the socialist movement of 1960s-70s, such a
Previously, I have pointed out a discrepancy between the general desire of pupils and their parents to reach a high level of education and the increasing rate of dropouts. This reflects a contradiction between the individual wishes and the public demands for education. I will further argue that this contradiction is a consequence of changing socio-economic environment while public education remained rigid and inadequate to meet the demands of individuals and society at large.

Looking back at the educational reforms during the past several decades, we may see that the most sweeping change had to do with the contents of education. The first reform in 1950 paved the way to the establishment of a socialist oriented education. The second reforms in 1956 particularly emphasized the instruction of socialist ideology and morality. It was regarded as the cornerstone of the whole educational system (Nguyen Khanh Toan 1995:158), accompanied by the issue of new text-books to meet this demand. Shortly after reunification, in 1978 the third educational reforms were launched on a larger scale in which new curricula and new text-books were introduced. The number of years of general education was raised from 10 to 12 years (MOET 1993:11; Pham Minh Hac 1992:24-32).

Although no official assessments were made on the third renovated curriculum, for many observers, its teaching contents are overloaded for the primary and secondary pupils. This is particularly true for rural pupils who normally have to work after school hours and have very little time for doing home work. The new text-books have also introduced more complex subjects which often are beyond comprehension for most pupils. For instance, in mathematics the operation of decimal fraction and equation (of the first degree), a subject previously taught at the secondary level, have been introduced to primary pupils (grade 5). Solid geometrics, a rather abstract concept, is a compulsory subject for lower secondary pupils. Furthermore, a number of complex and abstract socio-political topics such as the history of communist party, marxist-leninist ideology are taught at primary and lower secondary levels. These highly complex teaching programs are not only unsuited to young pupils but also cause great difficulties to the teachers themselves. Many of them lack adequate knowledge of these subjects and have to be retrained to meet demands of the new programs. It is estimated that in the whole country, 60 per cent of teachers did not meet the required levels (Nguyen Tri 1994:11).

Why did the education reforms emphasize the contents rather than teaching and learning methods? To understand this, a further analysis on the linkages between traditional education and today’s political system would yield more insight. In my kind of ethics was the target of criticism. Today it is again regarded a good cultural tradition (thuan phong my tuc) and worth being preserved.
opinion, the contents of education have been emphasized because of the ideal pursuit towards socialism. This is a deliberate attempt of the state to propagate through public education socialist ideals, norms, values, attitudes and skills to create the coming generations of "new people" to serve the socialist revolutionary cause. Because of this, Vietnamese children have for many years felt that they were going to school for the state, not for themselves, as expressed in the following statement:

For whom do you study? You study to serve the fatherland, to serve your people, to make your country powerful and your people wealthy. This means that you have to study in order to fulfill your obligation to your country (Ho C.M. 1990:122).

Such a guiding light is repeatedly affirmed in all official documents with regard to education. Recently, this platform of education is particularly re-emphasized by the Resolution No.2 of the CPV:

Education has to hold on the socialist oriented targets in its contents and methods of training [emphasized by this author] /.../ The principal tasks and goals of education are to be aimed at training the people who deeply attach to the ideal of national independence and socialism. (CPV 1997:28-29).

Actually, the idea of going to school to serve the fatherland had a strong impact on the education movement in the early years after independence and during the war against the Americans. But the situation has been changing. If "in the past, going to school was something done with a heroic sense, now it is rather a pursuit of individual interests" (Minister of Education Tran Hong Quan, 1995:47). This constitutes perhaps the most striking change in the minds of the people. It is the Minister of Education himself who found a "problem" in putting collective interests ahead of the individual demands in the field of education, as he said: "The biggest error of our education during the past years was that the individual roles were not seriously considered" (Tran Hong Quan 1995:95).

In a study on education in the Third World, Gould suggests a linkage between private and public demands for schooling: "Did the 'chicken' of private demand come before the 'egg' of public demand, or was it created by public demand?" (Gould 1993:13). However, we may notice that these two demands might not always come together. This is particularly true of countries undergoing a transition from the centrally planned economy to a market oriented system (Carnoy & Samof 1990).

Another problem of public education is the teaching method. As pointed out earlier, there was no effort from the teachers' part to stimulate creative thinking among pupils. Teaching was mainly a solo performance by teachers, leaving little space for two way communication or feedback. This is not something unique that occurred at Luong
Dien school alone, but rather a common feature of the entire education system, as educationalist Pham Minh Hac aptly puts it:

Teaching methodology is the most conservative aspect of our educational system. It does not seem to change in a positive way but still remains the same: the teacher reads and pupils take notes, heavy on learning by rote and light on thinking. Pupils learn in a very passive way. (Pham M.H. 1992:31).

This is again confirmed by the Minister of Education Tran Hong Quan:

We are still using the methods of the past decades, even of a half century ago (1995:50).

There was no room for allowing initiatives and creativity among pupils and students which are vital for their future development and personal growth (Tran H.Q.1995:94).

Despite its obvious shortcomings, this solo teaching approach is still commonplace at all levels of the educational system. It is deeply rooted in the conservative pedagogical methods and is difficult to change, all the more so in the light of the recent emphasis on 'learn rites first' (tien hoc le) within the school system. It is, in my opinion, a reflection of the traditional education that preaches obedience, and inherited from a patriarchal culture still prevailing within the society.

**Shifting the burden**

Commenting on the current education crisis, Tran Bach Dang, a well-known social activist, writes:

One cannot attribute the deterioration of the education system solely to economic difficulties. While this might be one of the reasons, surely it is not the crucial factor. The underlying cause is the attitude that looks down at education as something "parasitic", in such a way that its existence depends largely on the government's 'largesse' (Tran B.D. 1992:13-14).

In line with this view, I will consider the shifting of educational expenditures since economic reforms to understand how this change impacts upon education in rural areas. My central interests are focused on: 1) Teacher's salary, 2) School financial budget and 3) Educational expenditures of the peasant households.

"The teacher is a peasant whose teaching is a second job"

This statement, quoted from the Minister of Education Tran (1995:75), sounds like a humorous story, but it is quite true for the teachers of Luong Dien school. Among its 52 teachers, about thirty per cent hold a university or college degree and more than half have experienced 15 years or more in teaching. Most of them were trained and grew up during the years of the subsidy system. They had at one time cherished the ideal of
bringing knowledge to the peasants' children. However, today they all face the practical problem of how to survive while going on with teaching. Their monthly salaries vary from 120 to 360 thousand dong, depending on training level and teaching experience. Those teachers who were assigned to teach additional classes had a supplementary income of about one hundred thousand dong per month. With an average salary of 250 thousand dong monthly, they had to cover all expenses for their daily needs. Seventy percent of them were married and had one or more children to feed. Incomes of this kind could only cover just one third of their daily necessities, although there was a recent rise in teachers' salaries.\textsuperscript{104} Worse yet, during the 1980s teachers' pay was often late.\textsuperscript{105} Since the end of the subsidy system, housing facilities for those coming from outside Luong Dien were no longer available. Thus a part of their meagre salary had to be set aside for housing and transportation costs.

In order to make ends meet, teachers of Luong Dien had to look for extra jobs. For instance, among the sixteen teachers at the local secondary school, two worked as wood carvers, three engaged in petty trading while others organized private tutorials at home. Almost all teachers were involved in farming and raising livestock to supplement their incomes. A few teachers had to quit their teaching career for other jobs. Those still engaged in teaching often mused about the popular notion about their "noble profession",\textsuperscript{106} as the deputy headmaster of Luong Dien school told me:

None of us teachers have ever entertained the idea that one could become wealthy by teaching. But teachers often expect to be held in high esteem by society for their knowledge, dedication and character. But this is no longer true in the present condition. I have worked in this school for 16 years but I may quit next year. The low salary is not a problem for me. I can survive with my family support to go on teaching. I love children and my job but I can't accept this insult to our teaching profession.

Teachers' salary has become a controversial topic for debate in recent years. However, the problem cannot be easily resolved by the government. With some 800 thousand teachers at all levels, their payroll takes up more than 60\% of total government budget for the administrative and non-production sectors (Vice Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh 1994:4). There has been talk of slimming down the teaching staff to reduce the

\textsuperscript{104}The daily necessities consist of costs for health, education, clothing, fuel, light, water, transportation, communication, housing and food. Teachers however claimed that about 60 to 70 per cent of their incomes were spent for food. The teacher's salary is ranked the fourteenth among 18 occupations having the lowest salary in society (Hoang Tuy, 1996:3).

\textsuperscript{105}The average teacher's salary in the school years of 1985-1990 was 30 thousand dong per month. It was common for the state to owe the teacher's salaries from several months to years (Ban NNTW 1991, vol.2:224-25).

\textsuperscript{106}Between 1981 and 1990, in the whole country, about 20,000 teachers had left teaching occupation for other jobs. In 1995 the school system lacked 56,000 teachers (MOET & UNICEF, 1995:30). This estimation of shortage by MOET was based on a applying ratio of 1.15 teacher per existing classroom.
budget burden. While public statements call for an enhancement of education as "the primary national goal", what actually takes place at the grass roots shows the huge gap between reality and lofty rhetoric.

*The school-- 'an adoptee of local government'*

The head-master of Luong Dien school often used this metaphor to talk about the lamentable financial state of his school. It is true that for many years the central government could afford to pay teachers' salary. But the huge education network had become such a burden for the state and was now passed on to the local government.\(^\text{108}\)

According to the present authority, the commune is now responsible for covering the basic facilities of the school system (creche, kindergarten, primary and secondary school), such things as building and repairing classrooms, supplying desks, benches, black-boards and tables, etc. During the period of the collective regime, material facilities were supported by the co-operative. Decollectivisation took away from the school this important material source. Instead, the central government today allows the local authority to set up an educational budget in which the main source is from the people's contribution. The government is only responsible for paying the teacher's salary.

The educational budget of Luong Dien commune has been set up on the basis of three main sources:

1) Contributions by local people: The contribution level is, however, not certain. It depends on the situation of the commune each year. In 1995, the rate of contribution to education budget was equivalent to 4 kg of paddy per person. With a total population of 8,962 persons who were obliged to pay, the total amount to be collected was 35,848 kg of paddy.\(^\text{109}\)

2) Financial support by the district or province. This source is supplied in drops in order to encourage school material improvement. For instance, communes will be supported by an amount equivalent to 15 per cent of total expenditures

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\(^\text{107}\)During the 1980s, to save the public budget, the National Assembly decided to cut off 20 per cent of the staff in the administrative and non-productive sectors. Under this decision, many provinces tended to pressure a 'cut' on education and training branch (Minister of Education Tran Hong Quan 1995:81).

\(^\text{108}\) For many years, the education expenditure as a percentage of total public expenditure was between 3.7 per cent and 4.3 per cent. This budget was raised up to 6.7 per cent during 1980s and 8 per cent in 1992, (Ban NNTW 1991:230; MOET & UNICEF 1995:39-40). The CPV Resolution No.2 (1997) decided to raise education budget up to 15% in the year 2000 (CPV, 1997:35). In reality, the fund supplied by the central government for education met only 50 per cent of the needs. The rest of the expenses were passed on the local government (Nguyen Canh Tuan 1995:3-8).

\(^\text{109}\) One can pay in paddy or in cash. The local price of paddy in 1995 was 1,800 dong per kilogram. Total amount to be collected for commune's educational budget in 1995 was equivalent to 64,526,400 dong. The use of this budget is however decided by the local authority, not by the board of the school.
for each new school/classroom to be built.\textsuperscript{110}

3) Thirty per cent of total collected tuition are to be transferred to the commune educational budget. This source of tuition fees provides an amount of four or five million \textit{dong} every year.

Although the contribution to education budget was a great effort of the local people, the use of this budget was not under the control of the school but depends on the 'kindness' of the local leadership. As reported by the school headmaster, between 1992 and 1996, the commune of Luong Dien had spent a total amount of 50 million \textit{dong} for building a teacher's meeting room and providing some wooden furniture. Despite of this, all expenditures for office equipment (blackboard chalks, note books, pens and so on), which were previously supplied by the district educational services now fell on the teachers themselves.

The only financial source the school could have was thirty per cent of total collected tuition, which it was allowed to keep for its own activities. As reported by the school headmaster, this amount, about four million \textit{dong} every year, was just enough to cover the teachers' refreshment. In such a financial condition, other activities of school cannot be undertaken without more additional contributions of the pupils.

\textit{Education no longer as 'social welfare'}

Officially, education in Vietnam was free of charge until 1988 although since the early 1980s, extra contributions were already required. In December 1988, the National Assembly decided that pupils were to pay a part of tuition. This decision was made official by the Directive No.44/HDBT (4.1989) of the Council of Ministers, according to which pupils of grades one, two and three at primary level were still allowed free schooling but those of higher grades had to pay a fee. The minimum fee is equivalent to one kilogram of rice per month for pupils of grades four and five (primary level), two kilograms for lower secondary level and three kilograms for higher secondary level. According to the Minister of Education, "the average tuition of one US dollar per month is considered the cheapest in the world" (Tran Hong Quan 1995:62). Cheap as it might seem, many parents had difficulty to pay. Besides, there were other contributions to worry about. My investigation among the pupils of Luong Dien reveals that tuition fees took only about 20 per cent of total educational costs, as shown below:

\textsuperscript{110}The Director of Educational Department of Cam Binh district told me that a fixed amount to support localities in building new school was 5 million \textit{dong} for one classroom while the total expenditures to build a standard classroom were between 40 and 50 million \textit{dong}. In a plan proposed by Luong Dien commune, from now to the year 2000, there will be two new classrooms for secondary school and four classrooms for primary school. According to the school headmaster, this plan would meet only one third of the school's need.
Table 8.5. Financial contribution by pupils (in VND)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Amount paid/year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A set of text-books</td>
<td>45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Notebooks, pens, ink, etc.</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reference books</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tuition fees*</td>
<td>45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Construction fees*</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Examination costs</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. School insurance costs</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Fund for 'Little Plan' (Ke Hoach Nho)</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Fund for young gifted pupils</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Fund for supporting calamity victims</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Red-Cross fund</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Pioneer's/Youth League fees</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Extra classes*</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Pupils card</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Miscellaneous (lotto, gifts, feasts)</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>213,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

1. At the time of survey, 1USD was equivalent of 11,500 VN dong. These items and figures were compiled from information received directly from the pupils themselves, and cross-checked with their parents (and in some cases, with their teachers). In reality, while primary pupils did not have to pay tuition fees, their share of contributions were the same as those of higher levels.

2. Those items with asterisk (*):
   - Fees did not apply to primary pupils.
   - Construction fees mentioned here were spread among all pupils, not to be confused with contributions to commune education budget borne by all commune members.
   - The payment for extra lessons mentioned here was for additional classes on Thursdays, not to be confused with payment for private tutorials.

Sources: Own survey, 1995.

Although the level of these contributions might not seem unreasonably high, for many households they did take up a considerable share of their meagre incomes. If the average annual income of a peasant household in the Red River delta, as reported by the *Vietnam Living Standard Survey 1992-1993*, is 4,588,900 dong (SPC-GSO 1994:220), the education expenditures for each pupil (as listed above) took up about 5 percent of total household incomes, 60 per cent of which was already to be spent for food.\(^{11}\) Because of this, most parents often regarded schooling expenses for their children rather low on their priority list, next to food, fuel, health care, transportation, life-cycle obligations, e.g., weddings, funerals, house-warming, etc.

\(^{11}\)The *Vietnam Living Standard Survey 1992-1993* conducted by the State Planning Committee and General Statistical Office reports that among total household expenditures, education takes up 2.66%, health care 6.13%, and food 56.16% (SPC-GSO, 1994:199).
While the costs for private tutorials in Luong Dien were not so heavy as those in urban areas, these were often subjects of bitter criticism among the pupils and their parents on public education.\(^{112}\)

**Conclusion**

It was my purpose in this chapter to analyze the causes of depressed state of education in the conditions of socio-economic change in Vietnam. My own empirical observations on a village school supported by available statistics point to a rather high drop-out rate during the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these dropouts were between 12 and 16 years of age--an age where children were able to take part in the work force. This might explain a decrease in the number of pupils attending school at the secondary level.

My findings seem to indicate that intrinsically it is not the people who turned their backs on education. The current sad state of education is mainly due to the contradiction between individual pursuits and the public demands for education. Under the centrally-planned economy, such appeals as 'schooling for socialism' and attractions of 'becoming state cadre' often played an important role in pursuing education. The shifting to a market oriented economy has opened new avenues for life strategies, while the old demands of education system remain stagnant, lagging behind individual ambitions and labour market demands. This suggests that the problem of education must be seen in the context of a dialectical relationship with socio-economic factors and political system. In this relationship, "education is both agent of change and in turn is changed by society" (Fagerlind & Saha 1989:225). As the educational system (goals, contents and methods) does not adapt to socio-economic changes, there is always the risk of crisis.

Like many other theoretical and empirical studies on education in the Third World (Brown 1991; Weiner 1991; Gould 1993; etc.), my observations on education in Vietnam tend to strengthen the notion that one can only understand the uncertainty of education in relation to the role of the state.

Additionally, the empirical data presented in this chapter suggests that child labour studies which neglect the larger context of society and education might not yield valuable insights for practical actions (Standing 1982:611-613).

"Children's weakness and their ignorance might undermine the nation's stamina" (de Swaan, 1992:6). More than anywhere else, the prevalent rhetoric in Vietnam is in

\(^{112}\) "Additional tutorials" in the school system were regarded 'a national disaster' (\textit{quốc nan}). This issue has been discussed openly in public media. Since then, it had been banned by a Prime Minister's decree in 1996. For further discussion, see Khanh Huu 1992:4; Nguyen Thac Han 1995:8; Kim Thuy 1995:1-6; Nguyen Lan 1996:3.
full agreement with this logic, that "regardless the difficulties, education must be open (to all)", (Party General Secretary Do Muoi), and that "in a short time, in the field of education (we) are determined to catch up with other countries in the region" (Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet). The truth remains, however, that lofty ambitions from the leadership are far removed from present-day realities, pointing to the highly depressed state of education at all levels, as expressed by none other than the highest official in charge of national education:

How can we expect to enter the modern age when just 50 per cent of our total students are at the level of grade 5 (primary) and lower, and about six to seven per cent of our students just finish secondary school? (Minister of Education Tran Hong Quan 1995:82).

The story of children's education today reminds us to remember a popular saying of the old times criticizing the dream of a peasant to strive to become a member of the intelligentsia, the highest of the four social classes in traditional Vietnamese society (intellectual, peasant, craftsman and trader) but the realities of life often brings him back to where he starts from:

\[
\begin{align*}
Nhat sy \\
Nhi nong \\
Het gao \\
Chay rong \\
Nhat nong \\
Nhi sy \\
\end{align*}
\]

(First rank the scholars
Next the peasants
When rice runs out
You turn around
First rank the peasants
Next the scholars).

The saying dates from a bygone age but it still seems to be valid today.
Table 8.6. School dropout rate in Vietnam by levels and school years (in percentage).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School years</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Lower secondary</th>
<th>Higher secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8.7. Differences in dropout rate by areas in Vietnam in the school year of 1989-1990 (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Lower secondary</th>
<th>Higher secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole country</td>
<td>12.78</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>19.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>12.96</td>
<td>8.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho Chi Minh city</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>23.88</td>
<td>18.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nghe Tinh</td>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>24.09</td>
<td>16.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>21.47</td>
<td>38.73</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8.8. Enrollment rate by income quintile in Vietnam (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>(1) Poorest</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>(5) Richest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>from 6 to 10</td>
<td>66.90</td>
<td>77.57</td>
<td>81.49</td>
<td>84.96</td>
<td>84.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 11 - 14</td>
<td>18.58</td>
<td>27.82</td>
<td>34.90</td>
<td>44.60</td>
<td>54.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 15 - 17</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>14.52</td>
<td>25.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 18 - 24</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: According to Vietnamese standard, age group between six and ten is expected to attend the primary school, ages between 11 and 14 are in low secondary school, ages between 15 and 18 are in upper secondary school and ages between 18 to 24 are in vocational training or university.
Table 8.9. Number of school enrollment in Cam Binh district by school years (net number).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>% of sec. pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977 - 78</td>
<td>44,198</td>
<td>28,138</td>
<td>16,060</td>
<td>57.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 - 82</td>
<td>39,673</td>
<td>26,281</td>
<td>13,392</td>
<td>50.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987 - 88</td>
<td>37,927</td>
<td>25,544</td>
<td>12,383</td>
<td>48.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 - 91</td>
<td>38,743</td>
<td>28,477</td>
<td>10,266</td>
<td>36.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changed as compared to 1977-78</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Reports by the Department of Education, Cam Binh district archives.
Note: Population of the age group between 5 and 14 in Cam Binh in 1979 and 1989 was as follows: In 1979: 45,250 (1979 Census, Cam Binh archives). In 1989: 51,246 (TCTK 1989:16)