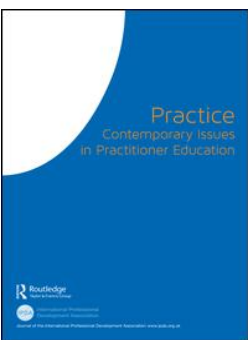

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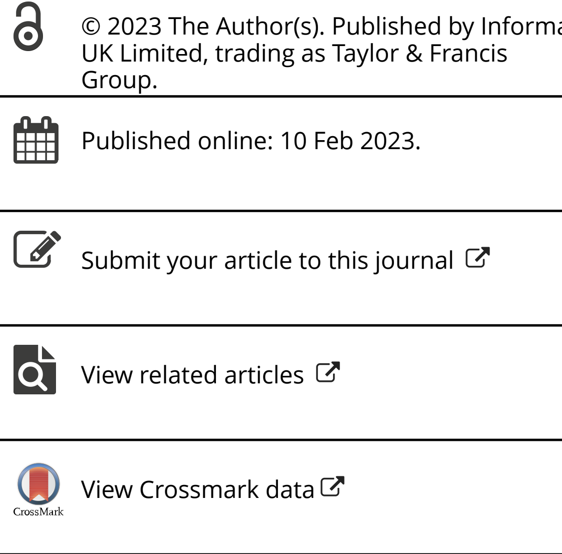

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Changing teachers' beliefs and practices towards learner-centred education: experiences and lessons from Vietnam's education system reforms

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ABSTRACT

This study traces back nearly five decades of Vietnam's reform policies of pursuing the learner-centred education (LCE) approach, and it gives insights into the latest attempts, the 2013 Fundamental and Comprehensive Education reform (FCER) and its central policy, the Curriculum 2018. Prompted by Schweisfurth's four continua framework on defining LCE, the study found evidence of teachers and principals generally accepting the intent of the reform policies, and teachers were using a greater variety of classroom techniques than previously. However, the findings suggest that teachers still control the content, pace of learning and classroom activities; there is a continuing tradition of relying on extrinsic motivation rather than developing students' intrinsic motivation to learn; and there is a lack of opportunities for students' rich and genuine reflections and expressions and the development of deeper understanding of complex problems. The paper argues that it is unrealistic to expect a radical transition without adequate teacher preparation, and that a scaffolded approach to developing teachers' understanding and skills is called for via professional development.

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Vietnam school reform; learner-centred education; teachers' perceptions and experiences; changing classroom practices; fundamental and comprehensive education reform; curriculum 2018

Introduction

Educational reform is currently a priority for governments around the world. Whether they be developed, or low-and middle-income countries, the recognition that education is a key lever of economic growth and social development is paramount (Hanushek 2013). However, decades of research have shown that bridging the gaps between reform policies and the reality of implementation is a demanding task (Stenhouse 1975, McLaughlin 1987, Fullan 2007). Policymakers are asked to realise that effective changes require much more than designing good policies (OECD 2020).

The reality that many countries, especially developing ones, have been facing great difficulties transitioning from a teacher-centred education (TCE) to a learner-centred education (LCE) is a prime example of how a widely supported policy idea may fail to live up to expectations (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2009, Schweisfurth 2013, Bremner 2019, Brinkmann 2019). The efforts and resources committed to the LCE reforms have been so great while the outcomes appear to be limited, even counterproductive in places, fuelling

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a vivid discussion over if and how countries should persist with their LCE agendas (Tabulawa 2013, Bremner 2019, Schweisfurth 2019).

This paper contributes to the current discussion by firstly, tracing back nearly five decades of reform efforts of Vietnam towards the LCE approach and, secondly, by exploring the perceptions and experiences of a sample of Vietnam primary school teachers, principals and vice principals regarding the implementation of the most recent and arguably the most radical attempts of the Vietnamese government to make LCE a reality, namely, the 2013 Fundamental and Comprehensive Education reform (FCER) and its central policy, the Curriculum 2018 (C2018). The findings provide evidence of changes in school leaders' and teachers' perceptions and practices indicating that some transitioning is occurring in Vietnamese classrooms; however, these changes appear to be partial. By applying Schweisfurth (2013) 's framework consisting of four interconnected dimensions of LCE, namely, teacher techniques, methods and skills, classroom relationships, the motivation for learning and the construction of knowledge, the paper gives nuance to the narrative of the changes being and suggests particular challenging areas that may prevent the FCER from achieving its aspirations.

The Vietnamese education system in context

In 2022, the population of Vietnam stood at approximately 100 million (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2022a), making it the 15th most populous country in the world. Politically, Vietnam has a communist and centralised form of government. Culturally, it is influenced by Confucianism. Both political and cultural forces help shape the governance of the education system, leadership and pedagogical practices in schools. Geographically, the country is approximately 1000 miles north-south and varies between 50 and 400 miles wide. Structurally, the basic education system is composed of 9.2 million primary students in 12,693 schools, 5.9 million lower secondary students in 8,846 schools, and 2.7 million students enrolled in 2,373 upper secondary schools. There are a further 2000 mixed schools. Hence in 2020–2021, there were approximately 26,000 schools (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2022b).

Vietnam has a young demographic profile, with resultant high pressure on schools and class sizes, especially in those newly populated suburbs where no new schools have been built. Administering nearly 26,000 schools over such varied contextual conditions (from major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh to remote, disadvantaged rural communities in the Central Mountains) presents major challenges for the government in overcoming the tyranny of distance and ethnic and socio-economic inequalities.

However, to outsiders, Vietnam education is an inspirational success story due to its achievements in recent international student assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Vietnam profoundly and sustainably outperforms other countries at similar income levels (Singh 2014 Parandekar *et al.* 2017, OECD 2016).

Nevertheless, from the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) 's and the Vietnamese government's perspective, these encouraging results masked a serious need to improve the quality of education. There has been a long-standing concern that the school system was too entrenched in traditional ways of teaching and outdated curricula, making it

inadequate for preparing the workforce with the requisite skills to meet important economic, political and social goals going forward.

Accordingly, the following section discusses the numerous reform attempts since the 1970s to modernise the school system and curriculum, which help explain why Vietnam has recently embarked on the most major and comprehensive education system reform to date – namely FCER, and the challenges this current reform is facing to accomplish its goals.

Previous Vietnam education reform efforts and the enduring challenges

The 2013 FCER followed three discernible earlier reforms since the 1970s, all of which have failed to substantially improve the problematic conditions for which they were introduced. The three reforms of note are first, the 1979 Reform; second, the 2000 Curriculum reform; and third, the 2011/2012 pedagogical reform. Details of each reform are discussed below, with a particular focus on changes related to LCE.

The 1979 reform

The year 1975 marks the beginning of a new era in Vietnam after a long and devastating period of war and resistance to colonialism. The 4th National Congress of the VCP held a year later, initiated a need for education reform, which then translated into important policies, including the introduction of the 12-year structure for basic education and new textbooks. This reform is often referred to as the 1979 Reform since the rationales, goals and principles to implement the reform are specified in Resolution 14-NQ/TW, issued in 1979. This document is important as it shows the early intention of the VCP towards a more practical and learner-centred education which was seen at the time as necessary for post-war social and economic recovery. The Resolution stated that a key principle of the reform was an accompaniment between learning and doing. There was criticism of the chalk-and-talk teaching approach and the suggestion that although knowledge acquisition is important, actively participating in real-world activities to apply knowledge is essential for the holistic development of the students (Political Bureau 1979).

However, the results of the 1979 reform were later evaluated by the VCP as limited. The VCP acknowledged that some of the goals established in Resolution 14 were too ambitious given the country's then-current circumstances. Serious limitations of the system were noted, such as extremely low teacher salaries, poor quality of teacher education, inadequate facilities and underqualified government and school leaders (Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) 1993).

The 2000 curriculum reform

In 2000, a new plan was put forward to renovate the curriculum, replace the textbooks and transform pedagogical practices, indicating the beginning of the next major reform period, known as the 2000 Curriculum Reform.

Curricula for primary and lower-secondary education were published in 2001 and 2002, respectively, and new textbooks were introduced gradually after 2001. However, it was not until 2006 that a national curriculum for students aged 6 to 18 was officially

announced, possibly suggesting a delayed awareness to create consistency throughout the system.

The 2000 Curriculum Reform was important to Vietnamese education because, as Duggan (2001) notes, previously, Vietnam had not had curriculum frameworks to guide teaching and learning processes. The textbooks were de facto the curriculum. Teachers were trained to deliver the content of the textbooks, and students learnt by strictly following lock-sequenced lessons as designed in the textbooks. Therefore, the introduction of the C2006 also promised a more logical and flexible learning experience for students.

The C2006 continued the long-standing philosophy of balancing knowledge acquisition and real-life applications by structuring educational aims into three main aspects: knowledge, skills and attitudes. That is, students were expected to learn necessary skills for their present and future lives besides discipline knowledge, such as observing and conducting simple experiments, raising questions, seeking information and expressing ideas in effective ways. The curriculum also aimed to develop positive attitudes in students, such as science interests and environmental awareness (MOET 2006).

In parallel with the features of the new educational aims, significant changes were outlined in the pedagogical approach. Students' voluntary, active and creative participation in learning and teachers' adaptation to students' needs and local contexts were highlighted. Teachers were encouraged to use active learning techniques and tools like brainstorming, role-playing, games, discussions, field trips, and experiments to promote student engagement (MOET 2006).

However, evidence suggests that despite the VCP and the government's strong desire to move the system beyond traditional teaching models, the status quo remained firmly entrenched. Lecture-style and rote learning still dominated classroom practices (Saito *et al*. 2008, Shadoian-Gersing 2015, Kataoka *et al*. 2020). Observations made by Tanaka (2020) from his research and counselling work in Vietnam from 2004 to 2007 reveal important insights into classroom practices during this period.

Tanaka (2020) describes primary classrooms where teachers were utmostly respected. They controlled the classrooms using strict orders and authoritative communication. Students were trained and got used to staying silent for long periods in the classroom, following orders, and pleasing teachers by providing expected answers. Even in classrooms where active learning techniques were used, changes were only cosmetic. Lessons were still focused on knowledge transmission. The dependency on textbooks persisted. Teachers paid more attention to covering the content and activities outlined in the textbooks rather than developing students' deep understanding of the knowledge and its relevance to their daily lives.

The 2011/2012 pedagogical reform

In an attempt to improve education quality, Vietnam also sought solutions by learning from other countries' good practices. Two major pedagogical initiatives were adopted in 2011 and 2012 due to this policy borrowing strategy – the LAMAP method and the Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) Programme.

The LAMAP method, also known as La main à la pâte (from the French phrase 'to put the hand at the dough'), is a pedagogical model proposed by the French Nobel Prize

Laureate Georges Charpak. As indicated by its name, the model encourages learning through hands-on experiences, in other words, through direct observation and participation. The model has been widely introduced to primary and lower-secondary schools since 2011 to promote student curiosity and critical thinking and give them more control over their learning process. However, to date, there has been little evaluation of the efficacy of this initiative.

Another effort is the VNEN Programme, which has received more attention and, arguably, is a typical example of what Hoyle (1969) calls the tissue rejection effect occurring when schools are unable to absorb innovations into their everyday operations. VNEN was funded by the World Bank based on a programme implemented in Columbia in the 1970s. The original programme is believed to have transformed many classrooms in Columbian rural areas into LCE realities where teachers become facilitators fostering student cooperative, autonomous and practical learning. Impressed by the programme's success in improving learning experiences even in challenging conditions, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) began to conduct a pilot programme in disadvantaged areas of Vietnam. The initial positive results of this pilot programme encouraged MOET to scale up the implementation (Parandekar *et al.* 2017).

The programme introduced new pedagogical elements to Vietnamese classrooms, such as self-paced learning guides, student government, group seating and formative assessment (Parandekar *et al.* 2017) All of these were expected to promote students' responsibility and autonomy in learning. However, after a few years of implementation, the initial enthusiasm towards these innovations gradually turned into disappointment and frustration as the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality became clear.

Qualitative data from Le's study (Le 2018) reveals the discouraging reality of VNEN implementation. In actual classrooms, the sophisticated philosophy of the original model was translated into a uniform 10-step learning process in which students mechanically follow the written commands in the learning guides. As a result, students still had little control over their learning. The bigger concern was that this new approach was not helping students understand the learning materials. Parents reported their children often came home with empty minds. Some teachers felt the need to add traditional teaching methods alongside the VNEN methods to ensure their students met the curriculum standards. The resistance from teachers and parents was so strong that many schools had to cease the programme (Minh Duc 2016).

In summarising the foregoing reforms, despite attempts to re-balance the teaching and learning practices in favour of learner-centred education, neither the government nor international agencies such as the World Bank were able to overcome the politico-cultural and institutional contexts of Vietnam. Contributory factors are many. For example, the deferential respect for teachers, the high expectations for knowledge acquisition, and the bureaucratic, rule-governed system have their roots in Confucian cultures and the Soviet legacy in political and administrative traditions (Nguyen *et al.* 2006, Pham *et al.* 2018, Huynh 2022). Other factors, such as poor working conditions for teachers, limited learning facilities and materials, and overcrowded classrooms, can be explained by a combination of limited financial resources and a large population. Finally, policymakers' and practitioners' incomplete understanding of LCE arguably results from a lack of rigorous research in education and inadequate pre-service and in-service teacher education (Hamano 2008, Mai and Hall 2017, Tanaka 2020).

The FCER and the C2018

The most recent system-wide reform launched in 2013 – known as the FCER – aims to respond to the concerns over the efficacy of earlier attempts. FCER is a grand overarching policy involving multiple mini-policies issued in different areas, including but not limited to textbooks and curriculum, teacher requirements, assessment, professional development and school leadership. While these major reforms show the Vietnamese government's willingness to learn from the past (for example, the need to realise the connectivity between the various elements), the same questions arise, as with past reforms, about whether these bold changes are sufficient to overcome the system's entrenched traditional beliefs and practices.

The beginning of the FCER is often linked to Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW issued by the VCP in November 2013. The document underlines the current weaknesses of the educational system and acts as a call to action. It declares that a reform that touches all the fundamental aspects of education is essential to bring about the transition needed (Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) 2013). A series of policies encompassing multiple education areas gradually came after this Resolution to realise the VCP's intent. Although the FCER policies involve different educational levels, including kindergarten and higher education, this paper focuses on basic education policies, some of which are listed below:

- The replacement of the grade-based evaluation system with oral and written feedback in primary schools
- The abandonment of homework in primary classrooms
- The merger of the High school Graduation Exam and the National University Entrance Exam to reduce the exam pressure
- Additional teacher requirements and standards (e.g. a primary school teacher now must have at least a bachelor's degree instead of an associate degree)
- A new blended national continuous professional development programme for teachers and school leaders
- 'One curriculum – multiple textbooks' policy to give schools more choices in selecting textbooks.
- The introduction of the Curriculum 2018 (C2018) and new textbooks.

To date, the FCER continues to expand in scope, with new policies on the horizon and occasional amendments made to existing ones. Limitations of space prevent discussion of all policies involved in this long-term, complex reform; thus, we focus on the latest, arguably the most important policy under the FCER, the C2018. It took the MOET five years since Resolution 29 to develop this new curriculum for students aged from 6 to 18, and not until 2020 was it officially put in place, starting with Grade 1. Highlights of the C2018 are, first, the redefinition of educational aims based on students' competencies and qualities, and second, the encouragement for greater school and teacher autonomy.

As previously stated, the C2006 defined educational aims in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, from MOET's viewpoint, this structure proved inadequate to end the tradition of focusing on knowledge transmission. Therefore, inspired by the competency-based education approach, which is strongly supported by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD) and implemented worldwide (Rychen and Salganik

2003, Trier 2003), MOET redesigned the basic education philosophy, aims and objectives around the concept of competencies and qualities. 'Competencies' are defined in the C2018 as

> the individual attributes developed on the basis of natural potential and educational experiences, enabling one to utilise knowledge, skills and other elements, such as interests, beliefs, and motivation, to successfully carry out tasks and meet demands in specific circumstances (MOET 2017, p.37).

'Qualities' are 'the positive characteristics of individuals evidenced in the forms of attitudes and behaviours' (MOET 2018, p.37). The addition of 'qualities' to the competency-based education model is explained as an adaptation to the traditional Vietnamese philosophy of holistic education, a balance between capability and morality (MOET 2017).

The C2018 sets out five key qualities (patriotism, compassion, diligence, honesty and responsibility) and three general competencies (autonomy and self-learning, communication and collaboration, and problem-solving and creativity) as the goals for basic education. This new design is significant for two reasons. First, the curriculum reflects an outcome-based approach in which the expectations for students (i.e. what they know, understand and are able to do when they complete their learning) are predefined to develop content, textbooks, pedagogy and assessments (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) 2008).

Second, using the term competencies emphasises that knowledge is not the central focus and should not be taught separately from other aspects and independently from life contexts. The transformation ensures consistency and relevance of the curriculum and, above all, is expected to give more flexibility and autonomy to teachers. Teachers are no longer required to strictly comply with what is written in the textbooks. They are encouraged to select materials and design lessons as they see fit to help students achieve the expected outcomes. The intention is that they will feel less constrained and more able to effectively apply active learning methods. The C2018 explicitly describes the image of students as active protagonists of their development and teachers as facilitators assisting students' learning (MOET 2018).

To date, relatively little has been published in western literature on the FCER, especially the implementation of C2018. This paper is thus timely and necessary in measuring the recent progression of the reform. The question to be answered is to what extent FCER/C2018 reforms have impacted teachers' perceptions and actual practices.

While our findings are relevant to Vietnamese policymakers and practitioners, international readers may also find our study useful as the challenges encountered by Vietnam in pursuing LCE appear little different from other systems targeting the same goal (e.g. Mexico, Sub-Saharan Africa, China, and India). Among the common challenges when implementing LCE, such as large class size, limited resources, student and sometimes parent, resistance, the challenge of understanding and interpreting the concept of LCE and its classroom manifestation is particularly significant, yet often overlooked (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2009, Bremner 2019, Brinkmann 2019). We agree with Neumann (2013) that without a clear understanding of what LCE means, implementing and evaluating the concept can be difficult and lead to ineffectiveness.

Consequently, after reviewing the concept, we decided to employ Schweisfurth's four continua framework to define LCE and to analyse the transition to LCE in the perceptions and practices of stakeholders. We believe that the framework helps to go beyond the understanding that LCE is only a set of pedagogical methods and that the occurrence of these necessarily equals effective implementation of LCE. It urges researchers and practitioners to view LCE as an educational philosophy of distinct beliefs about teaching and learning. These beliefs and values, therefore, should be the basis for designing reforms and evaluating reform results, not checklists of surface changes in teaching methods and techniques used. The following section discusses Schweisfurth's framework in more detail and the justifications for using it in this present study.

Conceptual framework: Schweisfurth's four continua framework

The concept of LCE is arguably a complex social construct whose meaning has been shaped by many, leading to diverse and sometimes contradictory concerns, assumptions and ideologies (Chung and Walsh 2000). Our aim is not to provide a thorough review of LCE's history and evidence to evaluate its effectiveness. Rather, the aim is more modest. Based on selected literature concerning the conceptualisation of the term LCE, we discuss prominent issues in its conceptualisation and then justify the choice to use Schweisfurth's four continua framework (Schweisfurth 2013) as a heuristic device to shed light on the contemporary implementation of LCE in Vietnam.

A central issue in conceptualising LCE is deciding how detailed the definition should be. As Bremner (2021) notes, a very brief definition like 'placing learners at the centre of the learning process' might have some appeal, but it lacks precision and, therefore, fails to explain the full meaning of LCE actually and how to translate it into practice. However, a too-detailed list of LCE features might also be inappropriate as it limits practitioners' adaptation to their local contexts, which may then lead to resistance or superficial implementation (Schweisfurth 2013).

A further issue is whether classroom realities should be framed into absolute categories, including LCE and TCE (teacher-centred education) – which stand in clear opposition to each other – or whether the range of differences between realities, are more accurately considered as a continuum, ranging from less learner-centred to more learner-centred features (Schweisfurth 2013).

After reviewing a number of widely cited frameworks and models defining LCE (e.g. Neumann 2013, Schweisfurth 2013, Weimer 2013, Starkey 2019, Bremner 2021) we found that Schweisfurth's four-continua framework, based on techniques, classroom relationships, motivation and epistemology/knowledge construction, simple but comprehensive, practical and appropriate for our analysis.

First, as Bremner (2021) points out from his review of the literature on LCE, Schweisfurth's (2013) four-dimensional model is generally able to cover the multi-faceted meaning of LCE. Second, Schweisfurth (2013) views the transition from TCE to LCE as moving along a continuum from less learner-centred to more learner-centred, which we believe is realistic and as Neumann's (2013) work shows, different contours or nuances of LCE exist regarding how learners are respected and given control in their learning. Additionally, in the same vein as Schweisfurth (2013), Neumann (2013) and Weimer (2013) make it clear that the most radical form of LCE may be unrealistic as it

involves students gaining full control of their learning with minimal teachers' influences, with no external evaluations like exams and grades, and without teachers introducing at least some knowledge directly to the students. Neumann and Weimer suggest a partnership-like relationship between teachers and students in which both parties share the responsibilities during the learning processes instead of an extreme form of LCE. Consequently, we believe Schweisfurth (2013)'s fluid-continuum framework is pragmatic in reflecting these variations of LCE reality.

Third, we find Schweisfurth's (2013) framework uniquely powerful as she makes a distinction between the technique level/dimension of LCE and other dimensions that make up the LCE philosophy and practice, arguing that all of these dimensions need to be considered in conjunction with each other to have a fuller understanding of LCE. According to Schweisfurth (2013), the first LCE continuum is techniques centred on activities such as group work or inquiry-based, problem-based and personalised learning. These practices contrast with traditional forms of pedagogy such as lecturing, teacher-led, whole-class based and standardised learning. However, while it is true that these alternative techniques are often observed in LCE classrooms, viewing LCE implementation as equal to the presence of these techniques in classrooms is insufficient. Schweisfurth's (2013) model recognises three other dimensions/continua of LCE that reflect a deeper understanding of the LCE philosophy and offer detail as to why and how the LCE techniques should be used.

The second of the four Schweisfurth's continua concerns classroom relationships, particularly teacher-student relationships. At one end of the continuum, teachers have enormous control over students' learning. Teachers decide what students learn, how they learn, when they learn, and how students are evaluated. A more learner-centred classroom – in contrast – gives students more choices and responsibilities. The range of possibilities is wide. Weimer (2013) offers detailed examples of how teachers can improve student ownership. For instance, teachers can let students select assignments, establish class rules, self-assess and peer review.

The third continuum concerns the motivation for learning. It raises the question – what is the main source of motivation for learning? Are students motivated to learn intrinsically or extrinsically? (Schweisfurth 2013). At one end of the continuum, students follow instructions and complete tasks for either teachers' evaluations or future exams' requirements. What motivates them to learn are the external rewards and punishments they might receive if they follow or fail to follow instructions. At the opposite end of the continuum, learning is interest-driven. Students engage in learning activities as they recognise the value of their participation; either they feel intellectually stimulated, and/or they can relate the lessons to their lives in meaningful ways. For example, they self-regulate, contribute to group discussions and prepare for class because they understand the consequences for their learning of the decisions that they make (Weimer 2013).

We disagree with Bremner (2021) when he criticises Schweisfurth (2013) for including the motivational aspect in her framework. Bremner (2021) argues that motivation is rarely mentioned in the literature on LCE and is not unique to LCE classrooms. Contrariwise, we believe there is evidence that building intrinsic motivation in students is a hallmark of the philosophy of LCE. As an example, Weimer (2013) highlights the reality that traditional classrooms depend too much on extrinsic motivation. She continues, 'students do things for points, grades, because they'll be quizzed, or there's some

other kind of requirement. Without those sticks and carrots, learning activities grind to a halt' (p.11). Meanwhile, 'learner-centred teachers work to do a better job of conveying the love and joy of learning'. (p.11).

The fourth continuum relates to the question of epistemology, of what it means to know, to understand something, and whether knowledge 'is a fixed body of information to be bounded, described and taught, or whether it is fluid, changing over time and subject to interpretation'. (Schweisfurth 2013, p.12). At one end, there is only a single source of truth, a source of knowledge trusted by everyone that cannot be negotiated. On the opposite end, knowledge is not ready-made and cannot be transferred directly to students' minds. It is the unique product of students' sense-making processes. Thus, teachers are encouraged to listen, respect and respond to students' knowledge, beliefs and experiences that they bring to the educational settings (Starkey 2019).

In general, we find Schweisfurth (2013) 's framework a promising tool for understanding LCE and the transition towards it, especially at the classroom level. However, this framework needs more empirical data to prove and test its validity and applicability. Hence, we claim that by applying Schweisfurth's (2013)'s framework to the reform context of Vietnam, this paper makes a contribution to the theoretical development and validity of the model by testing it as a heuristic device to explain the reality of LCE implementation.

Besides, in support of Tanaka (2020), we agree that paying too much attention to changing the techniques while lacking knowledge and experiences of what makes learning meaningful, effective and relevant has been a significant problem with the previous reforms in Vietnam. Thus, in selecting Schweisfurth's (2013) framework, we should be able to discern whether the same shortcoming persists in this latest FCER/C2018 reform.

Methodology

The findings of this paper were drawn from a larger multiple-case study undertaken from 2021 to 2022 on implementing FCER-related reforms in Vietnam primary schools. While the study investigated a broader range of issues, this paper focuses on classroom practices and to what extent they reflect the LCE agenda. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis were used to collect qualitative data that provide insights into these dimensions.

Sources of data

The study was conducted in three public primary schools in Central and Southern Vietnam. The three schools were selected to represent different socio-economic contexts in which the FCER and the C2018 are being implemented (i.e. rural/urban area; small/medium/large school size; low/middle/high-income area).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten teachers and three school leaders (principals and vice principals). Interviews lasted between 20–90 minutes and were conducted in both face-to-face and virtual settings. With the participants' consent, interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Classroom observations, school records, and documentation yielded additional data to enhance the credibility of the findings. The researcher observed 11 lessons in the three

Table 1. Participants' key characteristics.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age range	Years of teaching experience	Role
Thay Nhan	Male	40–50	15 years	Vice-principal
Co Minh	Female	30–40	12 years	Arts Teacher
Co Hue	Female	40–50	20 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Thuy	Female	22–30	5 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Han	Female	40–50	18 years	Principal
Thay Tuan	Male	22–30	4 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Bich	Female	30–40	10 years	English Teacher
Co Linh	Female	22–30	3 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Anh	Female	40–50	17 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Lan	Female	30–40	5 years	Music Teacher
Thay Tung	Male	30–40	7 years	Principal
Co Mai	Female	22–30	6 years	Classroom Teacher
Co Yen	Female	22–30	7 years	Classroom Teacher

case schools. Lessons lasted approximately 35 minutes and varied in subjects such as Maths, Vietnamese, Ethics, and Natural and Social Studies. After the observations, the researcher had informal conversations with teachers for 10–15 minutes to understand teachers' views on the lessons and rationales for their practices.

Documents for investigation included national policies, new textbooks designed for the C2018, supporting materials developed by MOET and textbook publishers such as training videos, demonstration lessons, samples of lesson plans, and school-level documents (e.g. lesson plans).

Recruitment of participants

School leaders in all three schools played the role of gatekeeper to help recruit participants. Participants were selected based on years of experience and subjects they taught to ensure the diversity of the sample. However, given the sequential approach in disseminating the FCER and the C2018, this study narrowed its focus on the implementation in Grade 1 and 2, where most of the reform efforts have been enacted. A summary of participants' key characteristics is given below (see Table 1).

At each stage of the data collection process, ethics procedures – as regulated by the University of Glasgow – were strictly followed. For example, participants were reassured of their right to withdraw at any point, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be strictly observed in reporting data.

Data analysis

Transcripts, field notes and documents were imported into MAXQDA – a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software – that helped the researcher store and code the data. Using Schweisfurth (2013)'s framework, we coded the data under four main predefined themes: 'techniques', 'classroom relationship', 'motivation for learning' and 'construction of knowledge'. The data analysis process followed a thematic analysis approach described by (Spencer *et al.* 2014), including five main steps: familiarisation, constructing the initial thematic framework, indexing and sorting, reviewing data extracts, abstraction and interpretation.

Findings

School leaders' and teachers' receptivity to the policy aims and intent of FCER and C2018

Analysis shows that teachers' and school leaders' thinking were relatively consistent with the key aims of the FCER and C2018. School leaders and teachers mentioned the transition from a concentration on knowledge transmission to whole-person development and the encouragement to develop transversal skills for students. In the words of one teacher:

> The students are now developed more holistically. They learn not only about knowledge but also life skills, competencies and qualities. It is no longer only about knowledge. (Co Linh)

There was also evidence to suggest a shift in participants' views regarding the three other dimensions of LCE besides techniques – classroom relationships, motivation for learning and knowledge construction.

The overall impression was that participants were aware of the changes foreshadowed in the roles of students and themselves. Such changes were clear in the words of one vice-principal:

> In the previous curriculum, the teachers transferred the knowledge to their students through lecturing, and students only listened. Teachers were active, students were passive. But for this new curriculum, students are engaged in constructing their knowledge. They can have hands-on experiences, discuss their opinions and contribute to the learning content. Learners' roles are crucial now. A teacher is just someone who guides and supports them. (Thay Nhan)

Participants also showed their enthusiasm for students' intrinsic motivation for learning. One teacher described her ideal lessons:

> The ideal lesson is not, for example, if the lesson is about addition, and my students can do the math correctly. The ideal for me is that the students can connect with the knowledge and feel the joy of learning. They leave class thrilled, not exhausted. They return to their home, probably, excited enough to open their books right away and tell their families about the lessons. They look forward to the next lessons. That is the ideal. (Co Anh)

Additionally, further evidence revealed that participants acknowledge the shift in the conception of the nature of knowledge and how it should be taught in schools. One participant noted that:

> In the previous curriculum, the teacher's guidebooks offered the right answers for all problems. They instructed teachers step-by-step. The new guidebooks are different. Since the new curriculum is meant to be 'open', there are numerous ways to approach an issue or problem. Students can give different answers, which can be all correct. Therefore, teachers must think and plan carefully to end the discussions in meaningful ways. (Thay Nhan)

In general, participants demonstrated their overwhelming support for the general intent and aims of the FCER and C2018. Their responses also suggest some perceptions and beliefs that align with LCE philosophy. However, how these tentative supports are translated into everyday classroom practices is important to know.

Teachers' and leaders' experiences of the policy changes in practice

Further investigation beyond teachers' and principals' general perspectives of policy intent and focused on teachers' self-report experiences and classroom observations revealed a more nuanced reality. While the uptake of LCE techniques was observable, changes in the other three dimensions of LCE, according to Schweisfurth (2013) 's framework, appeared limited.

Changes in techniques

It was clear from both interviews and observations that students' activities in classrooms were more diverse than in traditional classrooms. Group work and games were the most mentioned activities when teachers shared their teaching methods. Classroom observations confirmed that group discussions and peer assessments are commonplace. Students were asked to work in groups twice or three times during a 35-minute lesson. After completing the tasks, students regularly gave oral feedback on their peers' answers before the teachers declared the correct answers.

Games and role-playing were used in five of eleven observed lessons as an introduction to the new lessons or opportunities for students to have more practical experiences. An example was a lesson in which second-grade students were introduced to basic traffic rules. Some students acted as vehicles, and others as traffic lights and moved around the classroom according to the light signals.

Classroom relationships

However, there was little evidence from the observations that students were given opportunities to make meaningful decisions in or about classroom activities. The tasks were often short and simple, and student roles were mainly as participants rather than partners or contributors. Student expressions of their personal and genuine thoughts were yet to be encouraged. Any ideas, words and behaviours that went beyond the prescribed and expected flow of the lessons were frequently overlooked. Students still followed orders and commands from teachers with little time and support for their own reflections and expressions.

There was also an evident absence of differentiated instructional strategies to enable student choices. One teacher shared that:

> I have already heard about the learning station method and other strategies whereby students can learn at their own pace and follow their interests. I think it requires a whole school day to organise such activities, but now we have so many lessons to teach every day and other duties to complete. Thus, these activities are quite impossible, especially on a frequent basis. We just don't have enough time. (Co Yen)

Interestingly, although activities that have long-term efficacy and require and respond to more student inputs, such as problem-based and project-based activities, were introduced in the C2018 training videos as desirable practices, our data showed that they were rarely mentioned in textbooks and teachers' guidebooks in most subjects, or if they were, they were listed at the end of the lessons, which teachers reported that they might skip when the time was not sufficient. Inescapably, teachers still control the content, pace of learning and classroom teaching-learning methods.

Motivation for learning

Upon taking a closer look at strategies to engage and motivate student learning, most teachers used praise and criticism as their motivational means. One popular practice was asking all the students to clap their hands as a compliment or a gift for their peers' correct answers.

It is difficult to deny some positive effects of such practices; however, the impression given during observations was that some teachers praised their students in a superficial manner. Their words did not match their facial expressions and their tone of voice. Students also showed little excitement and sometimes even boredom when they had to clap their hands so many times to praise their peers.

A further observed strategy was teachers dividing classes into teams and giving or taking away points according to students' behaviours. Points would be accumulated and calculated at the end of the week in exchange for small gifts like snacks, pencils, and notebooks. In two observed lessons, this strategy seemed to be a productive way to encourage students' appropriate behaviours. However, in a particular lesson, it became a source of anxiety and tension among students. The teacher continuously warned students to behave, or they would lose points. She added points to a group sometimes, not because the group did anything that deserved her encouragement, but as she explained, it was a punishment for other misbehaving groups. She compared groupings, saying this one was good while another was bad. A tense atmosphere among students could be felt during the whole lesson, exemplifying a continuing tradition of strong teacher extrinsic motivation rather than developing students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Data from observations and interviews with our sample of school leaders and teachers showed that the role of grades and tests has gradually decreased in Vietnam primary classrooms due to the recent policies regarding the reduction of grade-based evaluation. Generally, however, it seems that teachers still feel the need to rely on external motivational measures like praise, criticism, reward and punishment to operate the day-to-day classroom activities. Our analysis of teachers' guidebooks, training videos, and lesson demonstrations showed a lack of detailed guidance on alternative classroom management strategies, which may help explain these observations.

The construction of knowledge

Our evidence showed that engaging students' prior knowledge when introducing new information has been recognised. For example, when students were going to learn a poem about the rainbow, a picture of a rainbow was presented to them to trigger their discussions on the colours of the rainbows, their feelings about the colours, and their actual experiences with rainbows.

Further, there was evidence of the use of pictures or photos in classrooms, following textbook advice, to help students 'self-discover' knowledge. In Moral Education and Social and Natural Studies, students were often invited to observe and analyse pictures in textbooks and categorise them into groups, for example, good versus bad behaviours. Students worked in groups of two or four, discussed their answers and then presented them to the class. Groups gave feedback to each other before the teachers gave the correct answers.

However, based on the lessons observed and the demonstration lessons provided by the textbook publishers to support teachers in implementing the new curriculum, there was little evidence that students' creative and critical thinking was provoked during these activities. Students often gave short, expected answers to issues that were relatively uncomplicated and non-controversial. As a result, the lesson flow was filled with continual student 'correct' answers and comments from students such as: 'My friend's answer is correct', which created a monotonous atmosphere. Asking more challenging and follow-up questions, such as 'why … ?', 'how … ', 'what would happen if … ?' (Hodgen and Webb 2008) to provoke thinking or make sure the students develop a deeper understanding of the issues, was rare.

Further investigation suggested that teachers were unprepared to ask higher-order, open-ended questions. Participants expressed feeling insecure and losing control when facing students' responses. We also found no evidence in teachers' guidebooks or training videos showing guidance or examples of appropriate and effective ways to communicate with students to facilitate a supportive and respectful classroom environment.

In short, in respect of the epistemological foundations of LCE, we found little evidence of opportunities for students' rich and genuine reflections and expressions and the development of deeper understanding of complex problems.

Discussion

In summary, a key finding is that our sample of Vietnam teachers and leaders was supportive of and receptive to the aims and intent of policy reforms enshrined in the FCER and C2018. They saw the need for a competency-based curriculum and the wisdom of students being more active and taking more control of their learning. Two reasons can help explain these positive responses.

First, as Hallinger (2010) points out, a certain degree of stability to maintain the vision of change is important for successful reform implementation. Analysis of our review of nearly forty-five years of education reform efforts in Vietnam suggests a consistency in policy aims. Whole-person development education, a balance between knowledge acquisition and application, and active participation of students in learning are some of the key ideas that run through all the reforms. The sole, stable and consistent reform aims of the VCP leadership in Vietnam is a plausible explanation.

However, Hallinger (2010) also recognises from studying reforms in other Southeast Asian countries, it is also possible that positive responses may just be the signs of passive receptivity – teachers accepting the initiatives without sufficient understanding and emotional connection due to a combination of a highly centralised administrative structure and a cultural tradition to show respect for authority, age, rank and status. Our data shows that this explanation at least partly applies to Vietnam. Although our participants showed genuine support for the FCER and C2018 and that some of the changes align with their personal beliefs, they also mentioned the new policies as something they were required to do, and they participated little in the decision-making processes.

Our second key finding is that although teachers seem to have accepted the FCER and the C2018 policy aims in general, when we looked at classroom practices (the key level of policy implementation), there was only partial evidence of change in activity.

In regard to school-level principal and teacher implementation of policy, we deployed Schweisfurth's framework as a heuristic tool. According to the first dimension of this framework, namely techniques, our evidence showed our sample of teachers were attempting to diversify and change their techniques and the classroom methods they used. However, Schweisfurth's (2013) framework compellingly requires us to look carefully beyond these techniques to see if they genuinely address the other important but more challenging and, therefore, often neglected dimensions of LCE.

The second dimension of the framework, namely classroom relationships, revealed that although students were participating in LCE-like practices, for example, group work, their thoughts and behaviours relatively failed to influence how the lessons progressed. Weimer (2013) argues that LCE 'demands that teachers move from teaching that focuses on what they (teachers) are doing to teaching that responds to what the students are doing' (p.87). It seems that this 'responsive' aspect of LCE was absent in our sample of classrooms.

Schweisfurth's third dimension is the source of motivation to learn. On this, we found that the motivation for the students to learn remained largely in teachers' hands through the use of praises, criticisms, punishments and gifts. Motivation to learn, therefore, was largely extrinsic. In regard to the fourth dimension – epistemology and knowledge construction – although students were encouraged to connect new knowledge to their personal knowledge and experiences, this was often done in a superficial way without a genuine respect for promoting students' independent and deeper thinking.

In general, all of these features do not seem to be much different from the classrooms prior to the FCER as described by Tanaka (2020) and Le (2018). Thus, while techniques teachers employ have changed on the surface, the classroom interactions and environment relatively remain unaltered.

These classroom realities indicate that although teachers seem to have significant desires to make changes in an LCE direction and have some tentative views of the LCE philosophy, their deep understanding of the concept and, therefore, its application in classroom teaching-learning practices, culture, and environment seem vague and superficial.

Our analysis of the new textbooks helps shed light on a key contributory factor to this problem. Although the new textbooks have been adjusted in several ways to align with the changes outlined in the C2018 (e.g. design, structure), they still focus on limited and less demanding LCE methods. The activities suggested in the textbooks are short, uncomplicated, and require little deep thinking and rich interaction between students and between students and teachers. Our observations show that teachers in general strictly followed these suggested activities with few additions and adaptations. The entrenched tradition of teaching based on what is written in the textbooks, as depicted by Duggan (2001) and Le (2018), still persisted even though the C2018 suggests that textbooks should be only one source of references.

This paper argues that the new level of autonomy and flexibility that the C2018 offers teachers is encouraging; however, teachers are not ready to grasp these opportunities for greater changes and professionalism without detailed and appropriate guidance and support. At present, it seems that textbooks and other guidelines from MOET and local authorities still play important roles in shaping how LCE philosophy is interpreted and translated into practice. Given the overcrowded curriculum and heavy workload, as reported in the

interviews with teachers, it appears that when there are inconsistencies between teachers' desires and textbooks' interpretations of the curriculum, teachers still decide to follow what is prescribed in the textbooks and guidelines. Without instructions and appropriate professional development on what methods and techniques should be used and how to use them effectively, the temptation to switch back to the traditional approach or make surface modifications seems to be great.

The foregoing analysis suggests that a scaffolded sequence of supportive teacher professional development is necessary for future successful reform implementation in Vietnam's school context. A scaffolded sequence would encourage and promote teacher understanding of the key beliefs and values underpinning LCE and staged teacher autonomy to adapt to the reforms and their local contexts. That is to say, teacher adaptations and flexibility are expected; however, they should be based on appropriate knowledge, skills and experiences possessed by teachers (Quinn and Kim 2017). The burden of interpreting the necessary changes should not be solely placed on teachers. High-quality textbooks, supporting materials and training programmes appear essential, all of which seem to need further development in Vietnam.

Conclusions

This paper has contributed to the literature by providing a detailed introduction to a series of system reforms in Vietnam that hitherto have received scant international attention. It has further contributed to theory by adopting and testing a comprehensive framework (Schweisfurth's) by which to understand and analyse LCE, its meaning and implementation in a sample of Vietnam schools. Based upon Schweisfurth's model, which we found applicable and nuanced, our analysis revealed signs of changes in Vietnamese teachers' thinking and classroom techniques. However, our data also shows that even when teachers have general beliefs in line with government policy and adopt some LCE skills and techniques, the classroom environment and culture – especially classroom relationships, motivational source to learn, and epistemological and knowledge construction – remain deeper classroom characteristics requiring greater teacher conviction, knowledge and awareness in order to generate change. Ultimately, authentic implementation of LCE involves more than just techniques. Changing techniques is necessary; however, it should be done purposefully and built upon sufficient teachers' understanding, knowledge and skills, which requires adequate and timely professional development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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