EDUCATION IN THE REFORM ERA: HOW POLICY AND POLITICS TRANSFORMED VIETNAMESE STUDENTS, SCHOOL LEADERS, AND COMMUNITIES

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by

Chi Nguyen

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The dissertation of Chi Nguyen was reviewed and approved by the following:

Kai Schafft  
Professor of Education and Rural Sociology  
Department of Education Policy Studies  
Dissertation Co-Advisor  
Co-Chair of Committee  

Soo-young Byun  
Associate Professor of Education and Demography  
Department of Education Policy Studies  
Dissertation Co-Advisor  
Co-Chair of Committee  

Edward J. Fuller  
Associate Professor of Education  
Department of Education Policy Studies  

Leif Jensen  
Distinguished Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography  
Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education  

Kevin P. Kinser  
Professor of Education  
Chair of Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

Education in Vietnam has gone through massive reforms over the last decades. Chief among those is the ongoing reform to the college admissions policy, a nationally standardized, highly competitive process that all Vietnamese high school graduates must go through to be considered for college admissions. As this reform draws public attention to standardized testing and tactics to master the new exam’s format and structure for higher scores, policymakers seem to ignore the structural inequities embedded in students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations that perpetuate the gap in college-going decisions among student groups. This dissertation offers a more comprehensive analysis of Vietnamese youth, schools, and communities in the reform era. Centered on social justice and equity issues in greater Hanoi, the dissertation explicates the impacts of recent reforms, particularly with respect to their intended and unintended policy consequences, on the educational experiences and well-being of rural/non-rural students, school leaders, and communities. This dissertation is structured as three separate articles addressing different aspects of the reforms.

The first article, Vietnamese Youth, Schools, and Communities in Transition: A Decade after the Administrative Boundary Extension of Hanoi, lays out the contextual foundation for this work by examining changes of rural youth, schools, and communities following the 2008 administrative boundary extension of Hanoi. While historically known as an urban, metropolitan hub of Vietnam, after the extension, Hanoi now represents both urban and non-urban areas, including several rural districts located in remote mountainous regions. As a controversial policy at the time of its announcement, how has this policy influenced the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities in the
non-urban, newly added districts? Drawing on 27 interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students of six non-urban high schools, the study reveals that the extension policy has not replaced the symbolic and cultural meanings of Hanoi in the mindset of rural community members, who still referred to Hanoi as ‘the other’ place. Moreover, while the extension has created rapid economic and sociocultural changes in rural communities, it delayed the process of rural school improvement. Amid these changes were rural youth, who struggled with their senses of place, decisions about leaving their hometown to attend colleges in “Hanoi,” and other difficulties they had to overcome, alongside their teachers and school leaders, to achieve their educational goals. The article provides a case study that illuminates how youth, schools, and communities are transformed during the rural-urban transition process, contributing to scholarship in the fields of rural education and rural sociology.

The second article, *Nationally Standardized Policy and Locally Interpreted Implementation: How Vietnamese School Leaders Enact Education Reform*, investigates how Vietnamese school leaders interpreted and implemented policy changes following recent reforms of the National High School Examination (NHSE). Data were derived from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 11 high school leaders (seven principals and three vice principals). Based on the cognitive framework by James Spillane, Brian Reiser, and Todd Reimer (2002), the study reveals that although the policy was standardized, school leaders’ interpretations and implementations varied greatly according to (1) their knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs (individual cognition) and (2) their institutional contexts (situated cognition). These variations may lead to inconsistent and unintended policy outcomes, as well as perpetuate systemic
inequities in access to higher education. The study provides a more contextual application of the cognitive framework to school leaders in a top-down, centrally controlled education system.

The third article, *Going or Not Going to College? Explaining the College Expectation Gaps Between Rural and Non-Rural Vietnamese High School Students*, investigates the college expectations of rural, urban, and suburban students in greater Hanoi. Findings from a survey of approximately 4,000 senior students and interviews with 40 students, 25 teachers, and 11 school leaders reveal a generally high number of students expecting to go to college; however a significant gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students persisted, even when controlling for other factors. The study points to students’ perceived positive connection between a college degree and future employment security and the advantages they might gain from a recent college admissions reform as major factors motivating them to apply to college. Meanwhile, their anxiety over the college entrance examination and desire to work immediately after high school were factors that discouraged them from applying. Particularly for rural students, the study finds those who decided against leaving their hometowns to attend college were not necessarily attached to rural life but rather felt a responsibility to stay and work to support their families. Using the case of Hanoi, the study contributes new perspectives to the long-standing scholarly debates over factors attributing to students’ college expectations and provides nuanced explanations for rural-urban disparities in college-going decisions.

The dissertation explains why and how top-down policy reforms, despite being highly standardized, lead to unintended policy outcomes and perpetuate social and educational inequities. The project highlights struggles that students and educators of under-resourced, rural schools have to overcome to adapt to policy changes. The dissertation concludes with policy
recommendations that aim to remedy the gap between policymaking and policy implementation within the constraints and benefits of a centralized political system.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Diep Tran (Trần Ngọc Diệp) and Bang Nguyen (Nguyễn Xuân Bảng), who have always believed in me and sacrificed for my education.
Chapter 1
Introduction

This dissertation grew out of my greatest, deepest, and most immediate fear as a high school student in Vietnam during the education reform era: waking up one day and learning that my future in higher education was seriously jeopardized due to a sudden change in the college admissions policy. This fear later came true, unfortunately; and worse, it happened during my senior year—the crucial year leading to the national college entrance examination. This experience was so traumatic that years later, even after graduating from college and shifting my academic career to the United States, it still strikes me every time I hear about a change in the Vietnamese college admissions policy. I cannot help but wonder how education reform has variously affected students, schools, and communities in Vietnam. Has the reform reduced the stress and expense of college admissions and broadened access to higher education for underprivileged students, as advocated by the government? Or has it turned college aspiring students into involuntary “experimental mice” for policy adjustments and educators into unwilling agents implementing those policies?

These pressing questions have fundamentally shaped my decision of the graduate-level research projects I have pursued—first a master’s thesis at the University of Pennsylvania (Nguyen, 2014), and now this doctoral dissertation at The Pennsylvania State University—on college access and education reform in Vietnam. On the surface level, these projects may look like a detour from my current academic path, given that most of my published work focused on education in the U.S. (e.g., Li, Nguyen, & Choi, 2019; Nguyen & Kebede, 2017; Nguyen & Quinn, 2018; Quinn & Nguyen, 2017). Rather, on a deeper level, these projects represent my
“journey home”—a pathway to the core of my research interests on social justice and educational equity and my positionality as a scholar of education. But first, in order to understand my journey home, it is important to take a step into my past.

A Journey Through the Past

Attending grade school in urban Hanoi, Vietnam in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I felt the constant pressure to get into a good college—a goal I was frequently reminded of by my parents, teachers, and society as the best way to gain upward mobility. However, the competition for admittance to a prestigious public four-year college was fierce. At that time, to be eligible for college admissions, all Vietnamese students needed to take two nationally standardized high-stakes exams, one for high school graduation and the other for college entrance. Students were only allowed to sign up for two colleges/majors, for which they would be considered on the basis of their college entrance exam scores. In 2008, around the time I took my college entrance examination, the World Bank reported only one in ten students who took the entrance examination was placed in a college or university (World Bank, 2008). Growing up in this stressful environment, I witnessed or was otherwise aware of so many students experiencing stress and depression, feeling stigmatized, or even committing suicide for failing the college entrance exam. Therefore, at a young age, I was determined to find a way to legally “cheat” the system so I could achieve my college goal without going through the conventional examination process.

At that time, there were only two ways to avoid the college entrance examination. The first way was to attend college abroad, which my family was not in the financial situation to do. The second way was to compete and earn a national or international award in a major subject.
(e.g., Mathematics, Literature, Physics, Chemistry), which appeared to be my only option, despite the fact that achieving it would require a terrible amount of work and sacrifice. Determined to follow this path, since the second grade, I worked with numerous teachers and coaches to narrow down a subject in which I could compete at the national level. After years of hard work, my writing ability (in Vietnamese) began to be recognized by several Literature teachers. They recommended that I apply for admissions to gifted classes in Literature at top-tier middle and high schools in Hanoi, where the most talented students would be given the opportunity to compete in the national Literature competition. Following this competitive trail, I was in the “gifted track” for seven years in top-tier schools, where I was consistently pitted against my classmates and students from other schools for regional awards in Literature, which later made me eligible for the national competition. To say that my secondary educational experience was stressful would be a gross understatement. The competitive nature of the gifted track made the classroom environment outwardly hostile, and the psychological pressure from frequent evaluations was sometimes unbearable. However, it seemed to all be worth it in the end when in my senior year, I was selected among a handful of gifted students to compete for Literature awards at the national level. It was such a big accomplishment that I felt as if I got one foot in the college door already—or so I thought.

The very next day after I had been chosen to compete at the national Literature competition, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) declared that there would no longer be any exception to taking the college entrance examination; students winning national or international awards still needed to take the exam for college admissions. This news struck me to the core; everything I had worked and sacrificed for suddenly turned meaningless due to a policy change that apparently came out of the blue. Even worse, a few days later, the
MOET announced that the high school graduation examination that year—a prerequisite for the college entrance examination—would include History, Physics, and Chemistry. I did not study these subjects for the entire senior year, as permitted by my school policy, to focus on advanced Literature. This situation meant that not only could I fail the college entrance examination, but I might also struggle to graduate from high school. My entire world shattered. I was devastated, and deeply upset with the MOET for making these sudden policy changes. But even more so, I was upset at myself for blindly trusting the system.

In the following few months leading to the high school graduation and college entrance exams, I abandoned my dream of winning a national Literature award and shifted my focus to prepare for these exams. To make a long story short, after countless sleepless nights, tutoring hours, energy pills, and tears, I passed both exams and was accepted to my first-choice college. Even though “everything worked out in the end,” as some would say, the negative impacts of that experience on my outlook on life, education, and meritocracy were detrimental and long-lasting. I could not help but wonder what was in the mind of education policymakers when they decided to make such a sudden policy shift. Had it ever crossed their mind that even a small change, to them at least, could crash the hopes and dreams of thousands of students? Why did the change need to be in effect immediately without any chance for public hearing or feedback? Had the authorities conducted any research or consulted any experts about the short-term and long-term impacts that the policy change could bring to students and Vietnamese education at large?

At the same time that I was struck by the college admissions policy change, Hanoi was also shaken by the establishment of a controversial policy that massively expanded its administrative boundary. Under this policy, Hanoi—a historically urban, metropolitan hub of Vietnam—now included non-urban districts, some of which were remote rural districts in
mountainous areas (see Figure 1). While there were extensive discussions at that time about political, economic, and sociocultural changes to the old and the new Hanoi, little was known about the potential impacts of the policy on rural students, schools, and communities.

Figure 1: Map of Hanoi districts (areas in the circle represent original urban districts)

Amid these reforms, as a student from urban Hanoi, I wondered what the policy would mean for my rural, underprivileged peers. Did they feel proud of being “Hanoians,” or were they saddened about losing part of their local values and identities? How did they cope with the changes of college admissions policy, given that they might not have the same level of resources and support I received as a privileged urban student?

All of these questions followed me as I went through college in Vietnam, traveled to teach in different countries, and became a researcher of education in the U.S. Ultimately, they
guided my way back to Vietnam for my doctoral dissertation research. This project is a testament to my dedication to Vietnamese education—my commitment to using world knowledge to understand and resolve problems facing Vietnamese students, schools, and communities.

Sociocultural, Political, and Spatial Contexts of Vietnamese Education

Hierarchical and Centrally Controlled System

Under the influences of Chinese Confucian culture—particularly its emphasis on hierarchy and collectivism—and Soviet Union’s political-bureaucratic structure, the Vietnamese education system is highly hierarchical and centrally controlled (Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). At the top is the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) that oversees the entire system and sets nationally standardized policies. Underneath the MOET, the system is further broken down to multiple hierarchical levels (i.e., province, metropolitan municipality, district, division), which are supervised by corresponding local government bodies (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

At the school level, by structural design, all faculty and staff are provided opportunities and platforms to voice their opinions and feedback collectively, such as via school’s Communist Party, Communist Youth Union, Labor Union, and other political and non-political committees. However, principals still have the highest authority in decision-making at school (Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017; Truong & Hallinger, 2017). Unlike other countries where principals are only in charge of school management, in Vietnam, principals are also required to teach at least two periods a week. Therefore, they are highly involved in many aspects of teaching and learning at school—as McAleavy and colleagues noted, in Vietnam, “the principal is seen as a
teacher and a leader of teachers” (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 26). Principals are highly accountable for school performance and expected to report to their external upper-level authorities on a regular basis. They often work closely with MOET local offices to obtain official information regarding policy changes and initiate the process of policy implementation at the school level (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018). School principals (and in some cases, vice-principals) are key players in the interpretation and implementation of education reform policies.

**Meritocracy and Standardized Testing**

Built upon the premise of meritocracy, education in Vietnam involves a great deal of merit-based testing, screening, and competition. The system is structured into five levels: (1) preschool, (2) primary/elementary school, (3) lower-secondary/middle school, (4) upper-secondary/high school, and (5) post-secondary education (Trines, 2017). With the exception of preschool to elementary school transition, moving from one educational level to the next often requires high stakes testing or transcript evaluation. The more prestigious schools are, the higher expectations and additional exams they demand of their prospective students.

For example, in Hanoi—the study’s research site—students who want to advance from middle school to high school are required to take an annual standardized exam of several core subjects. Their test scores will then be used in admissions to high schools within their ‘zones,’ designated educational units where their families officially register residency with the government. The higher scores students earn, the more possibility they will be admitted to highly ranked schools within their zones. In some special cases, particularly involving gifted schools/classes or high-achieving students, schools can admit students who do not reside in their designated zones and offer additional exams to recruit the highest performing students. However,
the MOET warns that it would monitor these cases carefully to prevent over-enrollment in schools that have already met their admission quotas (e.g., Khanh, 2019). On the one hand, the zoning policy promotes educational equity by providing equal opportunities for students to be admitted to nearby high schools and allowing local schools to maintain a stable enrollment rate. On the other hand, the merit-based admissions, which solely relies on standardized testing scores, perpetuates the gap in academic achievement and enrollment demand between higher-ranking and lower-ranking schools of the same zone.

Due to these structural inequalities, as this study later reveals, lower-ranking, rural high schools struggle to adjust to policy changes because they do not have the same level of resources and prior academic achievement as higher-ranking, non-rural ones do. These issues continue to affect high school students’ equal access to higher education as they are required to take yet another standardized exam—the National High School Examination (NHSE)—for college admissions. While there has been much debate about abolishing high-stakes testing, standardized test scores remain the primary criteria for secondary and post-secondary admissions, extending the testing culture and meritocratic tradition of Vietnamese education.

**Teacher and Teaching Profession**

Similar to their students, pre-service teachers have to go through an extensive training, testing, and screening process to secure a stable teaching position. According to the current Education Law, in order to teach at the elementary and secondary school levels, teachers need to have at least a bachelor’s degree in pedagogy or a non-pedagogical bachelor’s degree with additional teaching certificates (NASRV, 2019). The law states that the government is in charge of setting policies in teacher hiring, employment, and benefits. Meanwhile, schools are
responsible for proposing their demands for teacher hiring, participating in the hiring process, and managing their teaching staff (NASRV, 2019). The law, however, does not specify how the government and local schools work together to hire and assign teachers; this process is likely different across locations, schools, and opening positions. In general, to secure a permanent position at public school (similar to the tenure system in the U.S.), teachers need to pass the “civil service examination”—a standardized exam for individuals who wish to work in the public sector. The exam evaluates candidates’ political knowledge, foreign language, computer skills, and areas of expertise in multiple tests (GSRV, 2018). It is considered a highly challenging and competitive exam not only for pre-service, new teachers but also for experienced teachers who look for more permanent teaching positions (Nguyen, 2019). Alternatively, without taking the civil service examination, teachers can work at schools under fix-term renewable contracts. However, job security and benefits for contract teachers tend to be lower than those of permanent teachers who were hired after passing the civil service examination.

While teaching is a well-respected profession in Vietnam, the teacher salary is not high. Indeed, many teachers consider themselves inadequately paid and have to supplement their income by offering private tutoring hours after school (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018). For many years, the government has publicly disapproved of teachers giving tutoring services for their in-class students because in many cases, students feel compel to attend and pay for these “extra classes” with the fear that otherwise, they will be treated unfavorably by their teachers (Luu, 2014; Tran & Hâppham, 2005). Regardless, teacher-run private tutoring remains prevalent (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018), especially in high-income, urban areas where students and their families can afford these after school expenses. Meanwhile, in under-resourced or rural areas, many students do not have the financial means to pay for extra classes (even if they indeed
need this tutoring service), which inhibits teachers from offering private tutoring hours to earn supplemental income. This disparity creates and perpetuates the income gap among teachers in rural and urban areas and in well-resourced and under-resourced schools.

Although the Vietnamese Education Law mentions policies that provide support, bonuses, and other incentives for teachers working in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (NASRV, 2019), the financial value of these benefits is not significant. As shared by educators participating in this study, most teachers choose to work in under-resourced, rural schools because they were either born or currently live in rural communities or because they are passionate about helping students in need. In other cases, teachers temporarily work in these schools while waiting for opportunities to transfer, leading to a higher teacher turnover rate in under-resourced schools.

**Education Fund and “Socialization”**

Public schooling in Vietnam is not free. Although the government spends a large portion of the state budget for education fund (20 percent of total government expenditure in 2015), public education still comes with increasing costs for students and their parents (Trines, 2017). Currently, tuition fees are only waived at the elementary school level and the government plans to waive middle school tuition in the future (NASRV, 2019). However, on top of tuition, schools at all levels charge parents various supplemental fees, ranging from school maintenance and renovation to books and uniforms for their children’s enrollment (WES, 2017). This is a process often referred to by Vietnamese policymakers as “socialization” (xã hội hóa). Unlike how the term is commonly understood in non-socialist Western countries, socialization in the Vietnamese context means that the state and its citizens collaborate to finance public goods and services. As
public schooling is considered a public good, the government covers major educational expenses while the rest needs to be fulfilled by parents or other private sectors.

This financial structure of public education perpetuates inequalities across schools and locations. As evident in this study, high-ranking schools, which are often located in well-resourced, urban areas, receive a great deal of financial support from parents and private partnerships to improve teaching and learning quality. Meanwhile, low-ranking schools or schools in under-resourced and rural areas struggle as parents do not have adequate capacity to contribute to their children’s schools beyond the tuition fulfilment. This means that their students have to endure dilapidated—even unsafe—school infrastructure, outdated learning materials, and limited extra-curricular activities, including higher education and career orientation. Teachers and leaders in those underprivileged schools also need to work harder to provide necessary support for their students within a constrained budget.

**Rural-Urban Distance and Inequality**

As indicated in previous sections, many factors contribute to disparities in educational resources between rural and urban/non-rural schools in Vietnam. Rural schools are often under-resourced, under-funded, and under-staffed. Rural schools located in remote areas are further isolated. Since individual short commute vehicles, such as motorbike and bicycle, are much more common and affordable in rural Vietnam than cars, most people are unable to have a long-distance commute to work—or at least not the same way workers in Western developed countries do. Therefore, most rural school leaders and teachers are likely to live in communities that their schools are located. While this circumstance can create a stronger commitment and engagement to the local community among rural school leaders and teachers, it also limits their
spatial mobility and opportunities to recruit high-quality, prospective leaders and teachers outside of the community. Furthermore, the shortage of financial resources for teaching and learning and the lack of private tutoring opportunity to gain supplemental income discourage more teachers to work in rural schools. Indeed, many rural teachers interviewed in this study mentioned that they were widely aware of rural-urban inequalities and they themselves struggle to make ends meet. However, they chose to work in rural schools because they wanted to live near their families, fulfill their teaching passion, and contribute to their communities, which helped them feel content in their work.

Ironically, current education policies, which are designed to establish educational equality, also perpetuate inequalities between rural and urban schools. For example, the socialization process calls for collaborative efforts from both the state and its citizens to fund education—which aligns with Confucian and Socialist ideologies of collectivism—and allows local schools to crowdfund to finance areas that are uncovered or under-covered by the public fund. This process gives schools the authority to seek for external, communal funding to equalize access to and resources for education. However, socialization widens the financial gap between rural and urban schools, which are located in socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged communities, respectively. It may also create issues of corruption, unfairness, and stigma against students whose parents are unable to make additional contributions required by their schools. For these reasons, experts have been critical of socialization, stating that this privatized, collective funding mechanism for education only makes sense in times of economic crisis but should not be in place in times when tax revenues are sufficient to fund education (McAleavy, Tran, & Fitzpatrick, 2018).
Another example of education policies with conflicting consequences is high school admissions based on standardized test scores and zones. While middle-to-high-school standardized exam supposedly provides equal opportunities for all students to be considered for high schools within their zones, it draws the best performing students—those with the highest exam scores—to high-ranking schools and leaves the lowest performing students to academically struggling schools. Given that many high performing students are often from privileged backgrounds, their families are more capable of contributing to schools financially. The standardization process, therefore, perpetuates achievement gap and funding between high-ranking and low-ranking schools, which are often located in urban and rural areas, respectively. Aware of these inequalities, many rural parents try to send their children to urban schools, which may not be in the same designated zones of their family residencies. In my interviews with students of high-ranking, urban schools, some admitted that although their families resided in rural areas or non-rural areas of different zones, they were able to attend their schools because their parents sent them to live with friends and relatives in those urban zones or had relational connections that allowed their admissions as exceptions. In other interviews with rural/non-urban school leaders, some complained that many of their first-year students only attended the schools for less than a year and then withdrew to transfer to higher-ranking, better-resourced schools in the same zone or different zones in urban areas. The high school admissions policy based on standardized test scores and zones, therefore, perpetuates rural-urban inequalities and restrains academically and financially struggling schools from improving their circumstances.

These structural inequities explain why closing the gap between rural and urban/non-rural education has been one of the most difficult conundrums for Vietnamese educational policymakers and stakeholders. In the past decades, the MOET has made major policy changes,
including recent reforms of the NHSE—the central focus of this study—to reduce educational expenses and pressure among students and their families. However, unless these reforms directly tackle the root causes of inequity ingrained in the Vietnamese educational and political structures, the future of equity in education is still far reached.

The Making of The Present Study

The Expansion of Data Collection

Before I returned to Vietnam in late 2016 to begin my data collection process, I had been warned about and was aware of a common issue graduate students encounter during their dissertation fieldwork: their grand ideas and expectations about data collection often do not align with the limited capacities and challenging realities of the field, forcing them to scale down their data collection plans. Entering the field with my initial goals of conducting approximately 200 surveys of students and 20 interviews with students, teachers, and leaders across 12 participating high schools in greater Hanoi, I kept in mind that I might have to lower these goals if circumstances did not allow for the desired amount of data. However, what happened to me in the field was the total opposite. I left Vietnam in early 2017 with over 4,000 completed surveys of students (weighing over 100 pounds in my returning luggage!) and 53 interviews with 76 students, teachers, and school leaders. Not only was the quantity of the data overwhelmingly high, but the quality of data, especially the depth of many interviews I had with study participants, was also astonishing. The expansion of data collection itself tells a unique story and provides the significance of this study—particularly given that this was the first study on the
effects of education reforms on rural and non-rural Vietnamese students, schools, and communities.

More often, due to limited time and capacity when collecting data at schools, educational researchers only survey a subset of the student population by randomly selecting a number of students or a few classes within a school. However, when I proposed this approach to leaders of participating schools, they mentioned that given how their schools and classes were structured, randomly selecting and gathering representative senior-year students to complete the survey would be very time-consuming. In addition, picking only a few classes might lead to sampling biases since many classes are stratified based on students’ academic performance and preferred subject focuses. Therefore, we collectively concluded that it would be best if I could survey all seniors attending the school at the time of my visit. In other words, I would conduct the survey on the entire targeted population. Although this decision led to a significant increase in workload from my end, from the researcher’s perspective, I knew it was the best approach that ensured the rigor and robustness of the study. The positive outcome of this survey with an exceptionally high response rate (91.9%) proved that it was the right decision.

In addition, when I began interviewing participants about students’ educational expectations and aspirations—the original focuses of this project—I realized that there were many factors contributing to students’ educational plans that I had not considered when developing my initial interview protocols. Such factors included changes in the aftermath of the Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension and differences in local implementation of nationally standardized policies, which later became important elements of this dissertation. Inspired by these early, in-depth interviews I had with a few participants, I added questions to the original interview protocols to cover different angles of education reforms and their impacts on
educational stakeholders. This process prompted me to recruit more interviewees who could contribute to the conversations from various aspects. It also created interest in more prospective interviewees to voluntarily join the study because they wanted to share their opinions. Therefore, not only did the number of interviews I conducted increase (from 20 to 53) but their depth and scope also expanded.

In order to collect such a large amount of data within a short period (my time in the field was reduced to only three months due to Vietnamese traditional holidays and conflicting schedules among participating schools), I had to be sharply focused and efficient. To minimize commuting time, I visited urban, inner-city schools first because they were relatively close to one another and I could get to them easily by motorbike, taxi, or bus—the most popular means of transportation in Hanoi. For rural schools in remote locations, to which I needed to drive, I prioritized visiting those located on the same route. On one occasion, I visited two rural schools on the same day due to their close distance to one another and school leaders’ availability for in-person interviews. During my visits, I tried to be as efficient as possible. For example, while waiting for students to return their completed surveys, I interviewed their school leaders. In most schools, I recruited and interviewed teachers between their teaching sessions and interviewed students during their breaks/self-study sessions or after school hours. Whenever I had downtime during the school visits, I jotted down notes about my observations, thoughts, and reflections of each interview, participant, and school. At the end of each day, I reviewed my notes, ran initial analyses of collected data, and if needed, adjusted my interview questions for the following school visits. Having an efficient work routine with clear priorities and allotted time for self-reflection each day did not only allow me to stay on track but also kept my mind fresh and excited as I wrapped up one visit and moved on to the next.
Positionality

My positionality as a Vietnamese native and a U.S-based educational researcher is an integral element of this study. Having gone through the stressful senior year of Vietnamese high school myself, I was able to draw on my personal experience to connect with student participants, most of whom were also under great pressure to graduate from high school and enter college. Aiming to explain this dissertation project in clear and simple terms, I often told student participants that just like them, I was in my “senior-year” of graduate school and needed help to complete my graduation thesis, which would focus on high school students’ educational experiences in Vietnam. By showing an approachable and relatable researcher positionality, I was able to build a close rapport with student participants, who often called me “chị” (older sister), and to create a safe and comfortable atmosphere where students could share their personal thoughts and experiences. In most non-urban schools, I found that students were generally excited to have a researcher visiting and listening to their everyday stories, struggles, and future plans. This excitement was evident in the welcoming atmosphere when I arrived in each classroom and the high percentage of students voluntarily signing up for in-person interviews. However, in some urban schools, especially the high-achieving ones, students initially did not show much interest in either the project or my interview invitations; this was probably due to the high frequency of research activities and media coverage on these schools given their high performances. In these cases, I further emphasized my position as a U.S. based researcher, who graduated from an Ivy League university and was pursuing a doctoral degree in another major American university and offered to provide insights about study abroad and scholarship application. I found that this shift in positionality interpretation helped to make my presence more appealing to this student population. Indeed, after their interviews, some
participants reached out to me with questions about my study abroad experiences, which I gladly welcomed.

My privileged educational background, however, was also one of the biggest concerns I had when designing and implementing the survey. I was cautious that my position as a highly educated graduate in the U.S. might intimidate some students who did not have equally high aspirations for education and lead them to inflate their answers to survey questions about future educational plans. To address this anticipated issue, I pursued a variety of approaches to survey distribution to minimize my presence and impact on the process. For example, in a few schools, especially if suggested by school leaders, I personally visited each class, explained my study in front of students, distributed the surveys, and collected them. In these schools and classes, I only gave a brief description of my academic position—mostly, as a graduate student trying to complete her graduation thesis. I tried to avoid elaborating further on my educational background before collecting completed surveys, unless being asked by participants or having the need to do so in order to establish trust with participants. In most schools, however, I only met with student leaders of senior-year classes, provided them with blank surveys to distribute in their classes, and asked them to return the completed surveys (along with the follow-up interview sign-up sheet) to me. This approach not only limited my potential negative impact on survey participants but also was more time-efficient and aligned with the process in which schools routinely distribute announcements, surveys, and assignments to their students.

In approaching educator participants (i.e. school leaders and teachers), I clarified that my intent was to learn from them and their experiences, rather than interrogating them or judging their decisions. Therefore, I strategically positioned myself as a student. Talking in Vietnamese, I always used the common student pronoun (em) when referring to myself and used respectful
teacher pronouns when referring to educator participants (thầy for male educators and cô for female educators), regardless of their ages and professional titles. This approach helped me build close and respectful relationships with my educator participants and prompted them to share more openly about their experiences. To further ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable in the interviews, I always reminded them that the content of their interviews would be completely confidential and their names would be kept anonymous. Much to my surprise, most participants did not mind sharing controversial opinions. They openly expressed their criticisms towards the top-down education system, empty promises brought by the government, and systemic inequities perpetuated by policy reforms; some even shared about issues of financial transparency and violation of academic integrity happening in their schools. Considering how hierarchical and controlling the Vietnamese education system is, I was much appreciative of these participants’ openness, honesty, and bravery. I truly believe that my positionality and early efforts in building rapport with participants played crucial roles in crafting a deep, complex, and nuanced analysis of Vietnamese students, school leaders, and communities in the reform era—the present study.

**The Present Study**

As suggested above, this dissertation project stems from a passion of mine to answer questions on education policies and politics that I have wrestled with for over a decade. However, it also offers significant contributions to Vietnamese education, as well as to the contemporary scholarly discourse over the world by using Vietnam as a case study to address the complexities and nuances of rural/non-rural disparity in education. The dissertation is structured as three separate articles centered on recent reforms and their impacts.
The first article (Chapter 2) is a qualitative study on the changes of non-urban schools and communities during the ten-year transitional period after the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension. Using an ethnographic interview approach, this study gives voice to local community members, who shared their lived experiences and perceptions before and after the extension. From the sociological perspective, the study sheds light on the process of rural-urban transition and how this transition shifted rural community members’ perspectives on their standards of living, opportunities, as well as historical and cultural values. From the educational policy perspective, the study explicates the ways in which the extension policy, itself a consequence of macro-level political and institutional shifts, helped alleviate and, at the same time, amplify preexisting challenges facing leaders, teachers, and students in rural schools. This study contributes to education policy scholarship by explicating the gap between policy intents and policy outcomes as they pertain to rural youth, schools, and communities. This research also provides a good case study on rural-urban transition and its effects on people, education, economy, and sociocultural values of urbanizing rural areas—a topic directly relevant to both education and rural studies scholarship.

The second article (Chapter 3) is a qualitative study that borrows James Spillane, Brian Reiser, and Todd Reimer’s (2002) cognitive framework to examine how high school leaders in Hanoi interpreted and implemented changes following the recent reform of the Vietnamese National High School Examination (NHSE)—a nationally standardized exam that determines senior students’ high school graduation and access to post-secondary education. It explains how school leaders’ individual and situated cognition shape their understandings of the policy and create variations in its implementation, despite the government’s effort to nationally standardize the policy. Moreover, the study emphasizes how this implementation process might perpetuate
systemic inequities in access to higher education. Theoretically, this study provides a more contextual application of James Spillane, Brian Reiser, and Todd Reimer’s cognitive framework, which has been primarily applied to U.S. educational research. Furthermore, the research findings could be applicable to other countries, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, with similar centralized educational systems and nationally standardized policy towards college entrance.

The third article (Chapter 4) is a mixed-methods study on rural/non-rural students’ college expectations. Using a survey of approximately 4,000 senior-year high school students and interviews with 40 students, 25 teachers, and 11 school leaders, this study addresses the overall patterns of college-going among rural, suburban, and urban students, their motivations for going or not going to college, and factors that shape their decisions. The study informs Vietnamese education policymakers by illustrating how systemic inequities embedded in geographic locations perpetuate the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students. More broadly, the study contributes to the scholarly discourse on this topic by adding a new context to the theoretical frameworks and literature that have been heavily Western centric.

Collectively, the three articles represent a nuanced picture of Vietnamese education in the reform era. They illustrate how Vietnamese education policy and politics—which are centrally controlled and regulated—have transformed the lives of students, school leaders, and communities in Hanoi. Personally, writing this dissertation has been a transformative experience for me. On the one hand, the study gave me the opportunity to reflect on my past experience with college admissions policy reform, a topic that resonated deeply with most of my study participants. Drawing on social cognitive and educational theories, as well as diverse literature on this topic, I developed a deeper understanding of the frustration and resistance against policy
changes that we (i.e., the study participants as well as my younger self) had as subaltern people impacted by the reform. On the other hand, by re-visiting the original intents, contexts, and motivations of each policy change, I also understood why the Vietnamese government/MOET did what they had done and why they would likely continue doing so despite local resistance and critiques. In other words, the dissertation opened my eyes to, as James Scott (1998) says, “seeing like a state.” Therefore, as the following chapters of this dissertation proceed, it is important to keep in mind that my intention is to present both sides of the reform and to offer policy recommendations that are cultivated in the best interests of students.
References


Chapter 2

Vietnamese Youth, Schools, and Communities in Transition: A Decade after the Administrative Boundary Extension of Hanoi

Abstract

In 2008, under the establishment of a landmark policy, the administrative boundary of Hanoi capital—historically known as an urban, metropolitan hub in Vietnam—was extended to include the outlying, non-urban areas. Over a decade has passed, but the policy consequences of rural/non-urban-urban transition are still controversial. Drawing on 27 interviews with 55 school leaders, teachers, and students of seven non-urban high schools, this study addresses the following question: How has the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension influenced the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities in the non-urban, newly added districts? The findings reveal that the extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundaries has (1) not replaced the symbolic meanings of Hanoi in the mindset of rural community members, who still referred to Hanoi as “the other” place; (2) created rapid economic and sociocultural changes in rural communities; yet, simultaneously (3) delayed the process of school improvement. These factors have shaped how youth think about their home places and make decisions about their post-secondary educational and career opportunities, as well as how school leaders practice and overcome challenges inherited from their geographical locations. From a sociological perspective, the study sheds light on the process of rural-urban transition after an administrative boundary extension and its impacts on local communities. From an educational policy perspective, the study explicates how a macro-level policy could alleviate and/or amplify preexisting educational challenges facing leaders, teachers, and students in rural schools.
Introduction

Responding to the striking political and socioeconomic changes in the late twentieth century that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, *Doi Moi* (Renovation) policy was established in 1986. Its goal was to transform Vietnam from a centralized to a market-oriented economy (Pham & Fry, 2004). In this transitional period, one of the most important changes has been rural development. Because *Doi Moi* allowed the Vietnamese rural economy to extend beyond agricultural production and to include more commercial and industrial activities, the policy, as a consequence, has transformed the traditional culture and society of rural communities (Tsutsui, 2004). As a result, the borderline between rurality and urbanity has become increasingly blurred and arbitrary.

Since 2008, rural-urban assimilation has captured the public attention when the Hanoi capital region—historically known as an urban, metropolitan hub—was extended to include the outlying, non-urban areas. Specifically, under the establishment of a landmark policy, formally designated as 15/2008/QH12, Hanoi’s administrative boundary merged with the entire province of Ha Tay and other adjacent territories (CPVON, 2016). At the time of this writing, Hanoi includes 12 urban districts, 17 non-urban districts, and 1 town (Ha Noi Portal, 2018). While most of the newly added areas are classified as “non-urban” based on their geographic locations, industrial statuses, and administrative levels in relation to the urban districts of Hanoi, their degrees of urbanity and rurality are not the same. Within the same non-urban group, specific areas are further categorized into “Region 1” (highly disadvantaged area) or “Region 2” (disadvantaged area) according to their levels of remoteness, poverty, and inaccessibility of education, compared to their urban counterparts (“Region 3”– advantaged area) (See Table 1 and Table 2). In the general public understanding, Region 1, 2, and 3 are considered rural, suburban,
and urban areas respectively. It is noteworthy that unlike the affluent, civilized suburbs often seen in Western countries, most suburban areas in this context have far less economic power than urban areas. In Vietnam, suburban regions share more sociocultural characteristics with rural areas than with urban areas.

Table 1. Administrative apparatus of Hanoi (adapted from Ha Noi Portal, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban districts (Quận)</th>
<th>Non-urban Districts (Huyện)</th>
<th>Town (Thị Xã)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ba Dinh District</td>
<td>1. Ba Vi District</td>
<td>1. Son Tay Town</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Cau Giay District</td>
<td>2. Chuong My District</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Dong Da District</td>
<td>3. Dan Phuong District</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Ha Dong District</td>
<td>4. Dong Anh District</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hai Ba Trung District</td>
<td>5. Gia Lam District</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Hoan Kiem District</td>
<td>6. Hoai Duc District</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Hoang Mai District</td>
<td>7. Me Linh District</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Long Bien District</td>
<td>8. My Duc District</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Thanh Xuan District</td>
<td>10. Quoc Oai District</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. South Tu Liem District</td>
<td>11. Soc Son District</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. North Tu Liem District</td>
<td>12. Thach That District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13. Thanh Oai District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14. Thanh Tri District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15. Thuong Tin District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>16. Ung Hoa District</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 Phu Xuyen District</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. MOET’s regional divisions (adapted from MOET, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region 1 (Highly disadvantaged)</th>
<th>Region 2 (Disadvantaged)</th>
<th>Region 3 (Advantaged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 7 communes of Ba Vi District: Ba Trai, Ba Vi, Khanh Thuong, Minh Quang, Tan Linh, Van Hoa, and Yen Bai</td>
<td>1. Ba Vi District*</td>
<td>1. Ba Dinh District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 3 communes of Thach That District: Tien Xuan, Yen Binh, and Yen Trung</td>
<td>2. Chuong My District*</td>
<td>2. Cau Giay District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Dan Phuong District</td>
<td>3. Dong Da District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Dong Anh District</td>
<td>4. Ha Dong District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Gia Lam District</td>
<td>5. Hai Ba Trung District</td>
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<td>6. Hoai Duc District</td>
<td>6. Hoan Kiem District</td>
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<td>7. Me Linh District</td>
<td>7. Hoang Mai District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Quoc Oai District*</td>
<td>10. Thanh Xuan District</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. Soc Son District</td>
<td>11. South Tu Liem District</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. 2 communes of Quoc Oai District: Dong Xuan and Phu Man
4. 1 commune of Chuong My District: Tran Phu
5. 1 commune of My Duc District: An Phu

| 12. Thach That District* |
| 13. Thanh Oai District |
| 14. Thanh Tri District |
| 15. Thuong Tin District |
| 16. Ung Hoa District |
| 17. Phu Xuyen District |
| 18. Son Tay Town |

12. North Tu Liem District

Note. * Region 2 district that includes commune(s) listed in Region 1.

With this extension, the Hanoi capital region, now including both rural and urban areas, has become one of the biggest metropolitan areas in the world. The policy has significantly influenced the lives of many Vietnamese people living in the newly added districts, whose rural hometowns suddenly became part of the metropolitan area (Van, 2008). Most of these changes are massive and consequential, not only to the contemporary lives of Hanoi residents, but also to the sociocultural, historical, and symbolic meanings of Hanoi capital. Consequently, the policy has been controversial.

Although there has been a great deal of media attention to the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural effects of the policy on Hanoi and its residents (e.g., Quoc, 2013; Ngoc, 2016; Van, 2008; Vo, 2016), little scholarly work has been done on this subject, particularly from the educational perspective. While a few scholars mentioned the extension of the Hanoi administrative boundary in the context of urbanization and migration (e.g., Rigg, Nguyen, & Luong, 2014; Söderström & Geertman, 2013), none of them delved deeply into the impact of this policy on schools and communities in the newly added, non-urban areas of Hanoi. Little is known about the impact of the extension on educational inequity gaps between non-urban and urban school districts. Given that rural youth are often more vulnerable and sensitive to changes in their local schools and communities (Bajema, Miller, & Williams, 2002), this policy may have significant implications for the educational aspirations and opportunities of rural youth.
Moreover, considering the autocratic leadership traits of Vietnamese school leaders (Hallinger & Truong, 2014; Truong & Hallinger, 2015; Truong, Hallinger & Sanga, 2017) the policy—by including the newly added schools to the longstanding educational unit of Hanoi—may impact how non-urban school leaders handle new responsibilities and expectations, especially when being compared to their urban counterparts. Having a deeper understanding of what rural youth, schools, and communities in the newly added districts have experienced since 2008 would help Vietnamese policymakers better support rural school leaders, teachers, students, and other community members during this transition period. Considering the Hanoi administrative extension as a case study for the processes of urban-rural transition in the developing world, findings from this study can inform policy decisions and educational practices in other metropolitan areas across developing countries.

Accordingly, drawing on interviews with students, school leaders, and teachers, this study addresses a central question: *How has the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension influenced the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities in non-urban, newly added districts?* From a sociological perspective, the study sheds light on the process of rural-urban transition and how this transition shifted rural community members’ perspectives on their standards of living, opportunities, as well as historical and cultural values. From an educational policy perspective, the study explicates the ways in which the 2008 extension policy, itself a consequence of macro-level political and institutional shifts, helped alleviate and/or amplify preexisting challenges facing leaders, teachers, and students in rural schools.
Context

The 15/2008/QH12 Policy

After much public controversy, the 15/2008/QH12 policy was passed and enacted in 2008. It extended the administrative boundary of Hanoi by merging it with six areas: the entire Ha Tay province, one district within Vinh Phuc province, and four communes\(^1\) within Luong Son district, Hoa Binh province (CPVON, 2016; Söderström & Geertman, 2013). The extension was massive. It enlarged the land of Hanoi capital region 3.6 times and increased its population by 2,588,254 (at the time of merging). Hanoi shifted from being an urban-only metropolitan area to include numerous non-urban districts, many of which are located in mountainous remote regions.

The extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundary means a great deal to the legal statuses of people who reside in the newly added districts. In Vietnam, people’s legal statuses are tied to their family registration (hộ khẩu), a system that records people’s origins and residencies. People without a Hanoi family registration record (e.g., migrants) often find it hard to obtain inner-city employment, housing, school admission, and other public benefits (Rigg, Nguyen, & Luong, 2014; Karis, 2013). With the extension of Hanoi, an addition of over two million people have been made legally eligible for Hanoi family registration. Considered a form of “urban citizenship,” this registration promises easier migration processes, more educational and economic opportunities, as well as higher sociocultural statuses for these newly included residents and their family members.

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\(^1\) Commune (Xã) refers to the third-level administrative subdivision of Vietnam, below the province level (Tỉnh/Thành phố) and district level (Quận/Huyện) (GSO, 2015)
Policy Rationales

While there were several rationales behind this policy, the main motivation was to make sufficient land available for emerging development projects in the Hanoi larger metropolitan area (CPVON, 2016). Similar to many developing cities in East and Southeast Asian regions, Hanoi has encountered many issues related to fast-paced urbanization, such as inner-city density, increasing migration, traffic, and pollution. With the increasing number of people residing in Hanoi, the limited inner-city land could not match Hanoians’ high demand for living and working space. In addition, because most public institutions, such as central offices, colleges, and hospitals, are located in the inner city of Hanoi, many people need to commute to urban Hanoi districts on a regular basis or reside there for an extended period, which contributes to the inner-city density.

In this context, many Vietnamese policymakers and government officials believed that extending the administrative boundary of Hanoi would help solve the problems of urbanization (CPVON, 2016). First, by extending the size of Hanoi, there would be more land available for development projects to serve the increasing demands of inner-city residents. Second, with the extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundary, the government would be able to relocate or rebuild central offices and other major public institutions in the newly added districts, which, in turn, could attract people to reside in new districts and reduce the inner-city density. Third, policymakers claimed that the extension of Hanoi would reduce the gap in living standards and economic development between the inner city and its surrounding districts and regions, creating more equal opportunities for all residents living in and near this metropolitan area (CPVON, 2016; Van, 2008, Vo, 2016). When this policy was proposed, it received much support from residents living in newly added districts—who would become eligible for Hanoi “urban
citizenship”—and investors owning properties in these districts—who expected significant increases in their property values. Those agencies believed that this policy would bring positive transformations to Hanoi and its residents.

**Policy Controversies**

Despite strong rationales to support the policy’s establishment, many people, including researchers and historians, argued that there was not enough evidence to guarantee that extending Hanoi’s administrative boundary would solve the existing issues of fast-paced development (Hong, 2008). These stakeholders suggested that the extension of the administrative boundary must include simultaneous improvements in infrastructures, socioeconomic and educational opportunities, public services, and cultural supports for the suburbs of Hanoi. These considerations were largely excluded from the 2008 policy proposal. In addition, most ministries and government officials were concerned about leadership transition at the local level, particularly in terms of how to merge numerous local governments into the larger administrative unit of Hanoi without taking away too much local authority (Van, 2008). At the time of policy enactment in 2008, many local leaders and government authorities were still uncertain about their positions and managerial strategies in the upcoming years (Van, 2008).

In addition to administrative and leadership concerns, there were also questions about cultural assimilation and preservation at the time of policy enactment. The Hanoi capital has its historically and culturally symbolic meanings for Hanoians in particular and for Vietnamese citizens in general. The extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundary appeared to contest those symbolic values. Therefore, at the time of the policy announcement, the public was very
concerned about the ways in which Hanoi’s unique culture would be changed after merging with other local cultures, as well as how other local cultures could be preserved.

Almost a decade has passed since the establishment of 15/2008/QH12, yet most of these concerns remain unsettled. While this policy’s implications have been covered in numerous media accounts and a few scholarly works (Quoc, 2013; Ngoc, 2016; Rigg, Nguyen, & Luong, 2014; Söderström & Geertman, 2013), none of them have addressed the lived experiences and perceived realities of rural community members who have been going through this transition period. How have the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities changed over the course of a decade after the Hanoi administrative boundary extension? Having a good answer to this question would be critically beneficial for policymakers in Vietnam and other countries, who consider extending urban areas or merging small, rural districts, to understand the intended and unintended consequences of this type of policy on the wellbeing of local community members. From a scholarly standpoint, this research provides a good case study on rural-urban transition and its effects on people, education, economy, and sociocultural values of urbanizing rural areas—a topic directly relevant to both education and rural studies scholarship (e.g., Preston & Barnes, 2017; Yin, 2018; Smith, Archer, Nandwani, & Li, 2018).

Methodology

Data used in this chapter were taken from a larger study on the educational expectations and aspirations of Vietnamese students. From late 2016 to early 2017, I visited numerous high schools in the extended Hanoi metropolitan area to conduct ethnographic interviews with school leaders, teachers, and senior students. The interviews centered on factors that shaped students’
educational experiences and future plans. One subset of those interview questions mentioned Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension and its outcomes. This topic became a focal point of many conversations I had with educator participants. At various research sites, I often found myself engaged in deep and passionate discussions with school leaders and teachers, especially those in remote rural districts, about the intended and unintended consequences of the 15/2008/QH12 policy, particularly as it pertains to youth educational experiences and opportunities. This chapter is centrally built upon those conversations.

Analyzed data included 27 individual and group interviews with a total of 55 participants (7 school leaders, 14 teachers, and 24 senior-year students) in seven high schools located in newly added, non-urban districts. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. Data were coded both deductively and inductively on Dedoose, an application for qualitative and quantitative research analyses. Using a combination of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) and case study analysis (Yin, 2014), I identified prominent themes across the entire set of data (e.g., “Hanoi as ‘the other’ place,” “sociocultural shifts after the extension policy”) and then focused on specific cases of participants, schools, and communities that best illustrate these themes. This approach allowed me to capture a bigger picture of rural-urban transition across all schools and communities, and to highlight the unique characteristics of cases that represent the transition in similar or different ways.

The following sections will present major findings from the data analysis, which argue that the extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundaries has (1) not replaced the symbolic meanings of Hanoi in the mindset of rural community members, who still referred to Hanoi as “the other” place; (2) created rapid economic and sociocultural changes in rural communities; yet, simultaneously (3) delayed the process of school improvement. The chapter concludes with
a discussion of the main findings and recommendations for policy and educational leadership improvement.

The Administrative versus Symbolic Meanings of Hanoi

Hanoi as ‘the Other’ Place

Although all research sites were geographically and administratively situated in the larger Hanoi metropolitan area, study participants rarely described their communities as part of Hanoi. Most of them still used local names or names before the 2008 extension to specify their communities’ locations, administrations, cultures, and other characteristics. Consciously and unconsciously, they viewed Hanoi as “the other” place, to which they, their schools, and their communities do not necessarily belong.

Particularly, when rural youth talked about their plans to leave their hometowns and to “stay in Hanoi,” they specifically meant the urban, inner city of Hanoi—rather than the larger Hanoi metropolitan area as it is administratively defined. In their perspectives, Hanoi retains its symbolic meaning of an exclusively urban capital. For example, in a group interview, Nhi and Han², two female seniors at Bao Lam High School, shared,

Interviewer: What is your plan after college, Nhi?

Nhi: When I finish college, I would like to stay in the capital. The income level here [in Bao Lam district] is lower than it is in the capital. Also, [by that time] my parents must have spent a large amount of money for my studies. If I can get a job in the capital, I will stay there for a while. Once I have enough money, I will return to my hometown.

Interviewer: What’s about your plan, Han?

² All names of participants, schools, and communities are pseudonyms
Han: I would like to work for [a large corporation] in Hanoi. I will make enough money to build a new house for my grandparents. That should be done before I ever think of making a family for myself […]

Interviewer: Do you have any plan to return like Nhi?

Han: No. I don’t have any plan to come back.

(Group interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

Bao Lam High School is a middle-ranked, rural high school located in a mountainous region that is 30 miles from Hanoi’s inner city. The school serves a large number of minority students, most of whom are from severely poor, underserved communities in the further north sections of the region. In their responses, both Nhi and Han used the words “the capital” and “Hanoi” to refer to the urban districts of Hanoi—the “old” Hanoi before the extension. This was also the verbal choice and implication of most, if not all participants in this study. Similar to Nhi and Han, many rural youth compared their hometowns to “Hanoi” and asserted that living there would promise higher incomes, living standards, and career opportunities. The clear distinction between “us”—our local towns and communities—and “them”—the Hanoi city—not only reveals the disconnection between the new and the old Hanoi districts, but also emphasizes a significant gap between rural and urban areas of Hanoi. Based on the personal accounts of these community members, the goal of the 2008 extension policy to close the gap between Hanoi and its surrounding districts has not been met, even after almost a decade.

This persistent rural-urban gap continues to drive rural youth’s desires to leave their hometowns. Speaking of this pattern, Ms. Linh, a literacy teacher and youth mentor of Bao Lam High School, explained:

When our students look at their family’s living conditions and compare them to that of Hanoians, they see significant differences. Here [in Bao Lam district], they only see rice fields, cattle, and hills, which haven’t been reached by urbanization and its “fancy” touches. Particularly, because Bao Lam region is famous for its natural resorts, many tourists come here for their vacations. Observing these tourists, our students find further
differences in the lifestyles, appearances, and wealth [of rural and urban residents]...
Some students also help their parents run small businesses in those resort areas and that
makes them ask: Why are they the servers? Why can’t they enjoy a vacation like their
urban peers?… This fuels their burning desires to escape.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

Like her students, Ms. Linh used “Hanoi” and “Hanoians” in reference to only the urban districts
of Hanoi and their residents, while disregarding the fact that Bao Lam district has officially
belonged to Hanoi since 2008. Yet, her thoughtful comment on how rural youth often compare
themselves to urban peers was echoed by many other educators participating in this study. They
mentioned that after the extension, there has been more traffic and tourism from the inner city to
their local communities, which exposes more and more rural youth to urban lifestyles. Ironically,
it seems that after officially becoming Hanoi citizens, rural youth are indeed perceiving a greater
distance between themselves and “Hanoians.” The rural inclusion in administrative terms
appears to be unable to erase the symbolic meanings of Hanoi and Hanoians in public views. The
old and new districts of Hanoi, as well as their residents, are still separated by significant rural-
urban disparities.

Hanoi as the Ultimate Educational Destination

With their desire to stay in urban Hanoi permanently or temporarily, most student
participants considered higher education their “golden ticket” to leave their hometowns and
move to the city. For that reason, Hanoi has become their ultimate educational destination. On
the one hand, this seems to be a good educational goal for rural youth, given the high number of
colleges and universities located in urban Hanoi and the volume of student mobility generated
after the administrative boundary extension. On the other hand, some educator participants
warned that without guidance, such fixed mindsets and definite goals might hurt the educational opportunities of rural youth. For example, Mr. Thien, the vice-principal of Xuan Ha High School, explained the context of his school’s worst year of graduation rate:

Most years, our school’s graduation rates are around 70-80 percent. However, two years ago, the graduation rate dropped to only 55 percent. That was the first year when students residing in the extended regions [of Hanoi] were allowed to register to take the standardized High School Exit and College Entrance Examination in [urban] Hanoi. Because it was the first time, our students did not thoroughly understand the policy. They were simply excited by the opportunity of visiting the capital and many registered to take the exam in [urban] Hanoi…. Then, I guess, they lost their focus on the exam, they took the trip as if it were a vacation. As a result, the graduation rate was so low. Learning from this mistake, since last year, we have prepared our students more carefully for the exam and specifically suggested they take the exam in our local exam centers. That way, they can focus on the exam and avoid the costs of commuting [from Xuan Ha to urban districts of Hanoi].

(Individual Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)

Xuan Ha High School is among the most remote, underfunded rural schools in Hanoi. Xuan Ha mostly serves low-income, minority students from nearby mountainous regions or low-achieving students whose scores on the admission test are too low for them to attend any other public schools. Most senior-year students in Xuan Ha do not plan to enter college; their biggest goal is to obtain a high school diploma. Echoing Mr. Thien, school leaders and teachers in remote rural areas shared that because many students have never been in Hanoi, they do not have an accurate and realistic assessment of urban living. Therefore, their strong excitement about living in and desire to explore the city may distract them from their main task: to study.

In addition, by viewing urban Hanoi as the ultimate educational destination, many rural youth overlooked their options of local colleges and universities. According to several school leaders and teachers in areas that host local post-secondary institutions, this is an unfortunate mistake. They explained that attending local colleges would significantly lower the costs of tuition, fees, and living expenses for students and their families; some local colleges are also able
to offer high-quality education that is comparable to colleges in urban Hanoi districts. For example, Mr. Phuoc, the vice-principal of Bao Lam High School, shared,

I know that many of my students don’t like Bao Lam Industrial University (BLIU). They often apply to [another industrial college] near Hanoi [urban area]. Meanwhile, BLIU is so much better! It maintains good tradition and receives a lot of investments from foreign partners. BLIU is also capable of advancing students’ careers after college and offering them opportunities to study abroad. However, our students neither know nor care about this. They think that if they decide to go to college, it has to be a college in [urban] Hanoi. They think of BLIU as a “village school” [trường làng]. That’s a very negative and limited mindset!

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

BLIU is a postsecondary institution that offers different types of trainings, degrees, and certificates in various specialties and areas. It is located just a few miles away from Bao Lam High School. The students’ perception of local colleges like BLIU as “village schools” showed that locations greatly define the prestige of Vietnamese higher education institutions in the public eye and play an important role in shaping youth’s college choices. When this topic was brought up during a group interview with five Bao Lam senior students, they admitted that what Mr. Phuoc and other teachers said about BLIU was correct. Yet, none of them chose BLIU because, besides high-quality education, they wanted to earn their college degrees from “well-known colleges,” to explore “new environments,” and especially to learn “the language, lifestyle, and culture of original Hanoians” (Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese).

This mindset was shared among most student participants of this study, whose desire to leave their hometowns and experience “Hanoi” (whatever this means to them) is their main purpose of and motivation for higher education. This is a result of inequities between rural and urban areas of Hanoi, which have not been significantly improved after the 2008 extension policy. Most rural youth, schools, and communities are still living in this transition period and constantly navigating between the administrative and symbolic meanings of Hanoi.
Rapid Economic and Sociocultural Changes

Local Economy and Living Standards

In our interviews, most participants said that the Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension has created many positive changes to their communities. In particular, all seven school leaders said that after being merged with Hanoi, their school districts have received more attention from the government, which in turn attracts more investment to the local economy. Yet, some noted that the investment levels are not the same across districts and most of the positive transformations have been limited to only basic, material necessities.

Mr. Van, the principal of Anh Vinh High School, was optimistic about the local changes after the 2008 extension,

Interviewer: Since 2008, have you seen more advantages or disadvantages that the extension policy brought to your local community?

Mr. Van: In general, more advantages. We have received more investment from the central government, which helped improve our infrastructures and brought in other material resources.

Interviewer: How about the living standard of local community members here? Is there any change?

Mr. Van: Yes, a lot of changes. The process of urbanization quickly approaches our rural areas. The living standard has improved following the improvement of national living standards. The community members’ average income level has also been increased. Especially, the government’s investment helped boost local infrastructures, road quality, and property value.

(Individual Interview, 1/11/2017, in Vietnamese)

Anh Vinh High School is a middle-rank school in the suburban of Hanoi metropolitan. Shortly before and after the announcement of Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension policy, the local property values drastically increased. However, over the last few years, these values have
been decreasing as a result of delays in development projects intended for this area since 2008. Yet, echoing Mr. Van, many participants credited the extension policy for improving local economy, infrastructure, and living standards. They also viewed it as an inevitable stage of the urbanization process, in which rural development is progressing following the overall development of the nation.

From our interviews, it is evident that the most under-resourced districts have had the most significant transformation under the enactment of Hanoi’s extension policy. For example, Mr. Thien explained changes brought to Xuan Ha community and beyond,

After merging to Hanoi, the living standards of people in rural districts nearby Xuan Ha have improved. The city brought to us certain things, such as electricity, power line, lighting. Before that, only a few communes here had electricity. After 2008, most communes in our district have had electricity.

(Individual Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)

In this response, Mr. Thien highlighted that some basic infrastructural means, such as electricity, were given to remote rural communities after 2008. His choice of using the phrase “the city brought to us” implies an unbalanced power and wealth between urban districts and rural districts. Such an impactful policy as the Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension is the opportunity that remote, rural communities like Xuan Ha have always been waiting for to obtain the very basic necessities that urban districts may have taken for granted. The income and achievement gap between these locations is substantial.

Talking about this gap, many participants mentioned that although their local economy and living standards have improved, they are nowhere near that of urban districts. For example, Ms. Thy, a Literacy teacher in Cao Truong High School, a high-ranked high school in the suburban of Hanoi metropolitan, said,

In terms of economy, our district still does not have the same advantages as urban districts. [Urban districts] still have more support from the government. The fact that the
locals here are transitioning from farming to other businesses helped improve our economy a little bit. But these changes were not owed to the extension alone. Many local parents still struggle financially to support their children’s education.

(Individual Interview, 12/27/2016)

Similarly, Mr. Bao, the principal of Dong Ha High School—a minority-concentrated school in the same province with Bao Lam High School—said,

The [positive] result from the extension is more investment from the city. [However], the student performance here is still very low. This is because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds with much lower income and educational levels compared to students in [other areas]. In general, the educational standard of [this province] is always at the lower bottom of Hanoi.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

Both Ms. Thy and Mr. Bao spoke to the fact that while the extension policy has created certain economic improvements in non-urban districts, the gap between them and the rest of urban Hanoi remains significant. This equity issue is closely related to rural and suburban students’ academic achievement and opportunity. Without more substantial changes to close this gap, the educational outcomes in these areas will remain—as Mr. Bao well put it—“at the lower bottom of Hanoi.”

Sociocultural Shift

As previously mentioned, the extension policy has further exposed non-urban community members to urbanity via tourism, economic exchanges, and media. This exposure has a strong impact on rural youth, most of whom desire to leave their hometowns and pursue higher education and career opportunities in urban Hanoi districts. Many educator participants also expressed their concern about an increased comparison mindset among their students, who often think that they are “not good enough” and “less than” their urban peers. The educators worried
that this mindset might make youth become doubtful about their local traditions, cultures, and other unique characteristics.

In addition, when some rural districts and provinces became part of Hanoi, their local names were no longer used. Participants who were born and raised in these local areas said that they felt as if an important part of their identities was lost. The feelings of nostalgia were evident when participants mentioned their local names, symbolic folklores, songs, and cultural characteristics that are no longer in the mainstream media. Recalling Bao Lam’s former provincial name, Ms. Linh shared,

When we love our hometown, we will realize and understand its own uniqueness. For example, when we were still part of [the former province], every morning when we woke up we would listen to the local radio with many nice local songs, such as [a famous song about the beauty and heroic history of the province]... I’ve just re-taught my students that song… It is so touching. After being merged to Hanoi, we may have gained a lot [materially speaking], but we couldn't hold on to some of our cultural and spiritual values.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

This nostalgic feeling was also shared by many participants who had strong attachments to their local cultures and traditions. Almost ten years had passed since the extension policy enactment, yet none of these rural community members openly identified themselves as “Hanoians,” and most perceived themselves as different from urban residents—the “original Hanoians.” Meanwhile, they had lost many of their unique local values, which once defined who they were culturally and spiritually. This intangible loss could be very influential to identity development and sense of belonging among rural youth.
Delayed process in school improvement

In contrast to the fast-paced transformation of rural economy, culture, and society since Hanoi’s 2008 administrative boundary extension, changes to rural education have been very slow and subtle. Except for one school, which was newly built during the Millennial Anniversary of Hanoi, the six other schools participating in this study have been established for at least ten years. Most school leaders and teachers of these more established schools mentioned that there had not been any major changes to their school infrastructure and teaching and learning activities since 2008. In some cases, the bureaucratic burdens that came with the administrative boundary extension had even slowed down the process of school improvement.

Subtle Changes

Regarding changes that the extension policy may have brought to their schools in particular and to local education in general, most participants said that changes existed but were quite subtle. For example, some educators said that since 2008, they had been invited to high-level meetings in Hanoi Central Office of Education (hereafter, the Central Office). There, they learned much more information about educational administration, policy, and pedagogy that they could pass on to their students. They also had more opportunities to meet with and learn from colleagues working in high performing schools in urban districts. Some participants said that the information and knowledge they gained from events and meetings in the Central Office kept them up-to-date with new educational policies, programs, and approaches, which in turn helped improve their students’ academic experiences. Addressing this positive change, Ms. Linh shared,

Since the extension, we have more opportunities to network with colleagues from high schools in the inner city of Hanoi and broaden our school’s vision. With the new
knowledge, we are able to share more helpful information to students. The Central Office also becomes closer to local educators and students. There are more activities and programs for students, making them more active, confident, and informed than before.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

Yet to others, these changes were not as impactful. They argued that there were bigger issues, such as school infrastructure, teacher salary, and student achievement, that had not been addressed. For example, Mr. Thien said,

In terms of educational policies, there have not been many changes for us. Teachers’ salaries remain the same. Our students do receive a reduced tuition rate [for residing in a severely disadvantaged region] and students from low-income families receive a stipend of 70,000 VND ($3) per month. Other than that, nothing has changed. All policies and benefits for the school and teachers remain as they were before 2008.

(Individual Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)

Located in one of the most under-resourced rural areas of Hanoi, Xuan Ha High School serves mostly low-income and low-achieving students, many of whom are ethnic minorities. Because the tuition rate is very low, Mr. Thien said that his teachers had to work extra hours for little or no payment to prepare seniors for the National High School Examination every Spring semester. In my group interviews with two Xuan Ha teachers, they expressed their frustration towards the little support they have received from the Central Office, given their challenging working conditions and the extensive needs of their students. To them, there have not been many changes since their school began functioning under the management of the Central Office.

Because proposed changes that require funding from the Central Office often take a long time to be approved, some schools ended up creating changes themselves using funding obtained from a process that they called “socialization” (xã hội hóa). Unlike how this term is commonly understood in non-socialist, Western countries, in this context, socialization means that the school, via parent committee, launches a campaign among school’s parents to crowdfund an educational project that directly benefits their children. For example, many schools participating
in this study had used socialization to construct new buildings, organize field trips, and purchase new teaching and learning equipment. They shared that without socialization, the funding that they annually received from the Central Office and students’ tuition fees would not be enough to make any major changes to their schools. Mr. Ha, principal of Cao Truong High School, shared,

“One of my biggest concerns is the school’s material resources and facilities. Our school was established 55 years ago, so its infrastructure has been outdated and broken down… We try to self-renovate as much as we can and convince the Central Office to invest [in renovation], but the process has been very slow and scattered… I determined to use funding from socialization to renovate and innovate our school. I discussed it with the parent committee and they were very supportive. They ran several campaigns among the school’s parents to crowdfund a new parking structure for students and a computer and projector for each classroom. The entire process was transparent and objective. Our parents really care about their children’s education, so they all agreed to invest.

(Individual Interviews, 12/27/2016, in Vietnamese)

While socialization can be a good solution for schools to facilitate quicker changes, this approach seems to work only in middle- and high-ranking suburban schools like Cao Truong, where parents are often financially stable and actively involved in their children’s education. In low-ranking, remote rural schools like Xuan Ha, because most students are from low-income families, their parents are not financially capable of supporting any of the school’s crowdfunding campaigns. These schools have no choice but to wait for a bigger funding package from the Central Office to transform their schools.

**Extensive Delays and Burdens**

Dealing with administrative issues involving the Central Office on a daily basis, most school leaders expressed their frustration about the bureaucratic burdens that they have taken on since being merged with Hanoi. Particularly, some of them said that the extension further slowed down the administrative processing time, since everything that the schools want to change must
go through the Central Office. For example. Mr. Thien said that the transition between old and new Hanoi administrations delayed Xuan Ha High School’s renovation project for six years,

Our school was first built in 1999. The infrastructure has worsened over time and become unstable and unsafe for both students and teachers. In the late 2000s, we requested [the former province] to rebuild our school. [After a few years of proposing and waiting.] our school renovation project was accepted just before 2008. However, as this district came under the management of Hanoi. [this transition period delayed] the project from 2008 to 2014. Last year [in 2016], Hanoi finally began constructing a new building for us.

(Individual Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)

While other schools have not experienced the negative consequences of the extension policy as critically as Xuan Ha did, all school leaders critiqued the delayed process of administration due to bureaucracy. Mr. Bao, for instance, commented,

The administrative processing time is slow, and some issues have not been addressed radically. I think because the capital, Hanoi, is in the position of “national big brother,” the governmental leaders tend to take a neutral stand; they want changes to happen slowly so that they can see public responses and then adjust their policies accordingly. [In terms of administrative decision-making.] Hanoi isn’t as decisive and straightforward as other cities and provinces, such as Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, or Vinh Phuc.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

In his response, Mr. Bao surmised that the Central Office of Hanoi intentionally takes its time to consider any given issues in order to adjust their policies according to public reactions. Echoing Mr. Bao, many educator participants mentioned that after merging with Hanoi, their local control became weak and fragmented. As a result, it has been more challenging for them to initiate radical changes in their local communities and schools.

Moreover, being part of Hanoi’s educational system, these non-urban schools have taken on more burdens to keep up with their urban counterparts. Before 2008, the achievement levels of non-urban schools were not often compared to urban schools because of the longstanding equity gap in educational access and quality between school districts inside and outside of Hanoi. However, since 2008, because both non-urban and urban schools now function under the same
administrative unit, they have been expected to have comparable achievement levels. Such high expectations have created a great deal of tension with non-urban school leaders.

Talking about the pressure to keep up, Anh Vinh High School’s principal, Mr. Van shared,

> Since the merge, we have worked hard to catch up with Hanoi’s educational standards. However, the achievement gap still exists across regions [...] The quality of our education has always been lower than urban Hanoi districts; we need to follow them and complete any tasks that they assign to us.

(Individual Interview, 1/11/2017, in Vietnamese)

Mr. Van also added that because his school is now in the same unit as other urban schools, which, he argued, have more resources to attract high-achieving students, the possibility that his students might win an academic award over their urban peers is extremely slim. Other rural educators also shared that the burden to keep the overall quality of their schools up to par and to prepare their students to compete with their urban peers has become unbearable over the years. To them, the endless competitions have persisted in highly non-comparable contexts.

While one may argue that this pressure possibly motivates non-urban schools to improve their educational quality, it can simultaneously jeopardize rural schools’ drive to make radical changes. Many educator participants mentioned that on the one hand, they want their students not to focus on their test scores but on their real learning. On the other hand, they themselves are accountable for their students’ scores, which are expected to be comparable with those of students in urban districts. These competing interests may cause schools to lower their evaluation standards, overstate their students’ achievement, or even allow cheating. Addressing this perplexing problem, Mr. Bao shared,

> Our school is aware of the “fake achievement” (thành tích ảo) issue and is working to tackle it. But it’s a process, change cannot happen overnight. For example, if students only got 2 [out of 10] in their final exams, we will not necessarily determine their overall subject grade as 2.0. We will still give them
more opportunities to improve their scores, such as extra assignments and small in-class tests, to boost their final grade to at least 5.0 [— up to the average]. Before, [we would boost] their scores to 6.0 or 7.0, but now to only 5.0 — this negatively influences our school’s reputation. Our principal is also afraid that if our reported student achievement is too low, he will be rebuked in meetings [with top educational administrators in the Central Office] and pressured to use other “techniques” to boost these scores [...] If the student scores are too low, their parents will also question the evaluation of our schools, compared to others. [Therefore,] our testing and evaluation reform will be gradually improved and [hopefully] other schools will also make their changes to be more transparent.

(Individual Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

In his provocative response, Mr. Bao pointed to many issues related to transparency in education. While the school leaders determined to make radical changes in their testing and evaluation procedures to achieve more “real” scores, the pressure to keep up with high-achieving schools as well as to wait for other middle- and low-achieving schools to be more transparent has slowed down the process. This problem poses serious implications for rural students’ learning outcomes. Are they encouraged to study for real knowledge, educational advancement, and future opportunities? Or are they caught into the educators’ fight over accountability and transparency and pressured to study for the test and even cheat for “fake achievement?” These questions remain unanswered before the 2008 Hanoi extension and persist a decade after.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter examines changes in non-urban schools and communities during the ten-year transitional period after the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension. Using an ethnographic interview approach, this study gives voice to local community members—high school leaders, teachers, and senior-year students of newly added non-urban districts—who share their lived experiences and perceptions before and after the extension. The findings reveal that
despite officially being Hanoi’s residents for a decade, most participants neither identified themselves as “Hanoians” nor considered their communities to be comparable to the original Hanoi districts. To them, there is a clear distinction between the “old Hanoi” and the “new Hanoi.” The administrative inclusion of rural districts does not overwrite the symbolic meaning of urban districts as the capital. This distinction is a result of the significant gap in living standards between urban and non-urban districts, which, after 2008, has still not been ameliorated. While most participants credited the extension policy for improving the local economy and infrastructure, some participants argued that the improvement was not enough to close the socioeconomic gap between non-urban and urban settings. They also mentioned that the extension led to a decline in local cultural values and caused a negative mindset among rural youth towards themselves and their home communities. In addition, the increasing bureaucratic burdens and pressures following the merge have delayed the process of school improvement, which directly influences the educational experiences, aspirations, and opportunities of non-urban youth.

Given that the Vietnamese government has been planning to further extend the Hanoi capital region in the next decades (Minh, 2016), this study urges policymakers and government officials to re-evaluate the impacts of the 2008 extension policy on Hanoi’s residents and adjust their future plans accordingly. It is clear from this research that extending the administrative boundaries of Hanoi alone cannot close the socioeconomic and educational gap between urban and non-urban districts. On the one hand, the government needs to pay more attention to the developmental progress of rural districts and provide more funding to remotely rural schools, which constantly struggle to garner external and internal resources. One the other hand, the Central Office needs to take action to reduce bureaucratic burdens and unrealistic expectations
on newly added rural school districts and their school leaders. Allowing schools to have a certain level of autonomy would empower school leaders and teachers to initiate reforms towards school improvement.

Rural youth, whose identities, mindsets, and educational aspirations have been shifted by structural changes, are caught in the midst of these adjustments. Increased exposure to urbanity—partly due to the administrative extension of Hanoi—fuels rural youths’ desire to leave their home communities and pursue higher education. However, without clear guidance, exposure to urbanity can cause detrimental biases in youths’ college and career choices. To address this issue, the Central Office needs to work closely with local schools and communities to create programs that not only orient but also prepare rural youth for higher education and future career paths. Youths should also be encouraged to take pride in their local cultures and characteristics and to let go of the negative mindset telling them they are “less than” or “not good enough” when compared to their urban peers. The ultimate goal in rural education at the secondary level—shared by many school leaders and teachers participating in this study—is to prepare rural youths to not just leave, but also to return, and to give back to their home communities.

To this end, rural school leaders need to work with teachers to remind students of the historical and cultural values uniquely owned by their communities prior to merging with Hanoi. These values need to be taught alongside explanations of the increasing economic development and opportunities brought by the extension policy. In cases where competitive post-secondary education options are available within their local areas, school leaders should inform students and guide them to make post-secondary educational decisions based on their long-term career and life goals. As argued by educational leadership scholars, Jeanne Surface and Paul Theobald,
rural school leaders must understand not only the challenges but also the assets of their places:

“Rural leaders need to accept the challenge of leading schools by building on the assets that are available within the school and the community. Schools can be a source of hope and possibility for sustaining and improving life in rural communities” (Surface & Theobald, 2014, p. 576).

With confidence and belief in what rural schools and communities can offer, notwithstanding the label of “the second-classed Hanoi,” rural school leaders can inspire their students to embrace their local possibilities and privileges as they strive towards future success.
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Chapter 3

Nationally Standardized Policy and Locally Interpreted Implementation: How Vietnamese School Leaders Enact Education Reform

Abstract

Drawing from Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive framework, this qualitative study examines how Vietnamese high school leaders interpreted and implemented policy changes following the reform of the Vietnamese National High School Examination—a nationally standardized exam that determines whether students may graduate from high school and attend post-secondary education. The research found that at the national level, the policy is highly prescriptive, with expected uniformity and fidelity in implementation; however, at the same time, it is vaguely worded and inconsistent. At the local level, how school leaders interpreted the new policy varied according to their knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs, making their implementations deviate from the original policy’s intent. Their policy interpretation and implementation were also shaped by systemic inequities in academic rankings and educational resources of schools that they led. This research advances scholarship in educational policy and leadership by adding nuances to the cognitive framework. Using Vietnam as a case study, it illustrates how school leaders interpret policy differently in a top-down environment. The study explicates why this process can undo the logic of policymaking and more importantly, how it aligns with, and arguably exacerbates, social and educational inequities.
**Introduction**

*Over the last three years, the national exam policy has changed every single year. Every year there are several new adjustments to the exam. More often, we only know about these changes a semester before the school year ends [when senior-year students are about to take the exam]. I really don’t understand what kind of exam organization that is! These changes have made students more anxious and distracted from studying while they already have enough to worry about. It’s very stressful!*  

(Mr. Sinh, principal of Le An high school, in Vietnamese)

With every new education policy come adjustments from local schools to implement the policy (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These adjustments may vary widely, often depending on how school authorities, especially school leaders, interpret the policy and apply it to their unique institutional contexts. Therefore, in many cases, even with centrally controlled, nationally standardized policy guidelines, the policy implementing processes and outcomes are not uniform at the local level (Scott, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The gap between policy intentions and their practical outcomes calls for investigation into the process through which school leaders interpret a new policy initiative and make decisions to implement changes accordingly. Having a good understanding of this process is crucial because it can explain when and how policy implementation in the hands of local school leaders begins deviating from the original policy plans, potentially causing consequences unintended by policymakers (Scott, 1998). Thus, research on this matter can bring potential benefits to both policymakers and school leaders. It could help policymakers (re)consider how policy messages are perceived at the local level and how to control unexpected outcomes during policy implementation. It could also help school leaders reflect on their practices—especially, the internal and external factors that shape their sense-making—and how their approaches to policy implementation may have different impacts on student achievement.
Research on policy framing and interpretation has been largely and traditionally focused on policymaking—how policymakers define the policy problem and address it through policy solutions. However, over the last few decades, scholars began to turn their attention to policy implementation—how local actors frame the problem and interpret the policy during the stage of implementation (e.g., Scott, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Scholars (e.g., Coburn, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) draw on sociological theories of sense-making to emphasize the role of local interpretation in shaping the direction of policy implementation. Their research revealed that when receiving new policy information, local school leaders (or other implementing agents) often construct their understandings of the policy based on their preexisting knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs (Spillane, 2000; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This is a crucial finding because it suggests the exact point during the sense-making process when policy interpretation begins to deviate from the original intent and logic of policymaking. Social interactions among these local implementing agents (e.g., frequent exchanges among school leaders, teachers, and staff) also influence how they understand, interpret, and implement new policies (Coburn, 2006; Mangin, 2007). Furthermore, since implementing agents work within their unique professional settings, their interpretation and implementation of a policy are shaped by the institutional, communal, historical, and sociocultural contexts in which their schools are situated (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

The majority of research on this topic has been focused on schools in the United States. Yet, because the U.S. education system is highly decentralized and diversified, variations in policy implementation at the local level are likely. Although over the last few decades, the shift to state and federal control has suppressed certain local power, most U.S. national-level reforms only have direct impact on public education and some even allow exceptions or alternative
options to standardized policies. Therefore, the U.S. is arguably not the ideal context to study the implementation of top-down education policies. Meanwhile, countries with highly centralized education systems have much more potential for research on policy implementation. In these contexts, because major education policies are often nationally standardized, they come with strict rules, tight instructions, and even professional trainings to ensure uniformity in policy implementation processes and outcomes at the local level. Regardless, variation between policy and practice persists (Scott, 1998). In highly controlled policy environments, the contributions to policy outcome variations of school leaders—who are at the forefront of education policy implementation—are easier to identify and clearer to observe. Research on policy implementation in centralized educational systems, therefore, would bring both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing literature on this topic. It would illustrate why and how local practice can undo the logic of macro-level policymaking—even within a tightly controlled system where uniformity and fidelity in policy implementation are totally expected.

Vietnam has such a system. In Vietnam, most education policies are nationally standardized and strictly monitored by the government. Vietnam, therefore, provides an ideal case study to examine the root of variations in implementation across local schools. However, there is little research on this issue in Vietnam (See e.g., Truong & Hallinger, 2017; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017 among a few). This lacuna represents a missed opportunity for U.S. and international scholars to learn lessons about leadership and policy in a strictly top-down educational context. Not only can research on Vietnamese school leaders help clarify factors contributing to variations in policy implementation at the local level—factors that may not be apparent in research that is situated in decentralized educational contexts—but it can also open a new line of work on this topic from an international and comparative perspective. Besides
Vietnam, other countries with centralized education systems, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, also face a wide range of challenges in the implementation of education policy (Mok, 2006). Yet little is known about how their challenges are different from one another and different from those in countries with decentralized systems like the United States. Research on the Vietnamese context, therefore, enriches the literature on sense-making and policy implementation—which has been heavily U.S.-centric—by considering the existing theoretical and practical frameworks in the international and comparative sphere.

In addition to being U.S.-centric, existing research on school leaders as implementing agents has focused more on their sense-making process than on the practical actions taken to implement the policy. This is a significant gap in the literature because school leaders’ actions can reveal not only their interpretations of a policy but also the situations in which their policy implementation occurs. While policy interpretation can be entirely owned by school leaders’ individual cognition, their actions to implement the policy are likely bounded by external factors, such as institutional resources, communal support, and teacher capacity (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). These contextual forces may cause a separation between school leaders’ ideas for implementation through sense-making and their actual practice. Furthermore, given that school leaders often spearhead decision-making at the school level, their real-life actions in policy implementation are important to explore because they can have a potentially strong impact on student academic outcomes (Chitpin, 2019; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). While it is challenging to draw a direct correlation between school leaders’ policy interpretation and student achievement, it is more feasible to record school leaders’ actions and observe how they lead to different achievement outcomes. Therefore, research that considers school leaders’ actions during the policy implementing process is crucial. Not only does this scholarship inform the best
practices of school leaders in the area of policy implementation, but it also contributes to the scholarly grounding of educational policy, leadership, and achievement.

This study remedies these gaps by examining how 11 high school leaders (i.e. principals and vice principals) in Hanoi interpreted and implemented policy changes following the recent reform of the Vietnamese National High School Examination (NHSE)—a nationally standardized exam that determines senior students’ high school graduation and access to post-secondary education. Data were derived from the qualitative portion of a larger mixed-methods study on NHSE. Drawing on Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive frame in the sense-making process of policy implementation, the study addresses three major research questions: (1) How have school leaders made sense of the NHSE policy changes? (2) What factors have influenced their sense-making in the policy implementation process? and (3) How might their actions, guided by their understandings of policy initiatives, have affected students’ post-secondary educational opportunity and access?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study borrows the cognitive framework developed by James Spillane, Brian Reiser, and Todd Reimer (2002) to explore Vietnamese school leaders’ sense-making in the policy implementation process that centered around policy changes to the National High School Examination. Building upon previous theories and literature on cognitive processes and social recognition in policy implementation, Spillane and colleagues argued that implementing agents (e.g., school leaders, teachers, staff) construct their understandings of policies based on their preexisting knowledge, values, beliefs, and experiences, as well as the situational circumstances that they are currently in (Spillane, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). These constructed
understandings sequentially shape how implementing agents communicate the meanings of policy initiatives to their colleagues and students and how they decide to implement policies in their schools and classrooms (Coburn, 2006; Spillane, 2000). The framework is particularly helpful in explaining the complex and nuanced process of policy interpretation and implementation at the local level, which can variously affirm, modify, and/or contradict the logic of policymaking at the state level.

The framework involves three core elements: (1) the individual implementing agent (individual cognition), (2) the situation in which sense-making occurs (situated cognition), and (3) the policy signals (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) (see Figure 2). The first element—individual cognition—claims that what and how individuals make sense of new information has much to do with their prior knowledge, expertise, values, beliefs, and experiences. Cognitively speaking, “new information is always interpreted in light of what is already understood” (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 393). Therefore, even when receiving the exact same information about a new policy, school leaders with varied knowledge and experiences may have completely different understandings and interpretations of the policy. Consequently, they may choose to communicate the information to their colleagues and students very differently, leading to variation in execution and outcome of policy implementation. The second element—situated cognition—focuses on the situation or context in which individuals’ sense-making process occurs. “Individuals do not make sense of their world in a vacuum,” Spillane and his colleagues (2002) argued, but rather “their sense-making is situated in particular ‘thought communities,’ including, but not limited to, professions, nations, political parties, religions, and organizations” (p. 393). Prominently in the educational literature, situated cognition is rooted in the relationship between educators and their schools, local communities, and professional organizations (Coburn,
2006; Spillane, 2000 among others). These social contexts create different “thought communities” with embedded characteristics, knowledge and belief systems that affect how school leaders make sense of policy and translate such understandings into action. The third element—policy signals—emphasizes the importance of policy stimuli, including the design of the policy itself and the ways in which policymakers convey their ideas and instructions about policy changes to implementing agents. Depending on the nature of policy change (substantive or superficial) and how it is represented (abstract or concrete, general or specific), school leaders may construct their understandings and interpretations of policy differently from one another and from the original intents of policymakers (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

![Figure 2: Cognitive framework (adapted from Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002)](image)

Providing a critical lens into local implementing agents’ responses to a new federal or state-wide policy, the cognitive framework has been used in numerous studies that examine how
educational leaders make sense of recent education policy initiatives. For example, James Spillane (2000) used a cognitive lens to explore school district leaders’ response to mathematics reforms in Michigan. Drawing on 80 interviews with district administrators, curriculum specialists, and lead teachers who actively were involved in developing and implementing district policies, the author found a shared pattern in district leaders’ understandings of the mathematics reforms. Most of them gravitated to reform themes that appeared more familiar and tended to interpret these themes based on their preexisting knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. As a result, their understandings were inclined to “piecemeal changes” that often missed the full import or disciplinary particulars of the reforms (p. 162). The study highlighted the cognitive frame’s contributions to the understanding of how education policy has been implemented at the local level. Spillane argued: “[The cognitive frame] moves us beyond documenting that locals missed the spirit of the reforms to explore patterns in district leaders’ understandings of reform in order to account for why policy gets implemented as it does at the district level” (Spillane, 2000, p. 168).

In another study informed by this cognitive frame, Melinda Mangin (2007) examined individual and situational conditions that lead elementary principals to support instructional teacher leadership. She conducted interviews with 33 study participants, including principals, teacher leaders, and district-level supervisors from five districts in New Jersey. Her research revealed that principals’ support for teacher leadership initiatives stemmed from their prior knowledge of the position and interaction with teacher leaders. In addition, communication from district-level supervisors about teacher leadership could also influence principals’ knowledge and interaction with teacher leaders, which consequently leads to their support for or opposition to instructional teacher leadership (Mangin, 2007). Thus, the author argued that among other
potential conditions, communication and interaction shape principals’ sense-making of policy initiatives. The more involved principals are in reform efforts, the greater support they lend to their staff (Mangin, 2007).

Although Spillane’s (2000) and Mangin’s (2007) studies have brought nuanced understandings to the ways in which educational leaders make sense of new policy initiatives, neither delved into actions that leaders took to implement the policy and how such actions might influence students’ academic achievement and opportunity. Moreover, both studies, along with most research using a cognitive framework to explain sense-making, have mainly focused on educational leaders’ individual and situated cognition—the “bottom-up perspective” of policy implementation (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 420). While valuable, it is as important to understand the role of policy signals—“the top-down perspective”—in the process of implementing new policies. As emphasized by Spillane and colleagues (2002): “The top-down perspective is important in this [cognitive] model because the policy messages and the manner in which policy documents represent the messages are influential in implementing agents’ understanding of them” (p. 420).

In this article, I borrow Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive frame to incorporate both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives of policy implementation. The main objectives of this study are to explore how (1) the representations of policy changes in the NHSE, (2) school leaders’ prior knowledge and experiences, and (3) their social contexts have influenced school leaders’ responses to these changes. Going beyond school leaders’ sense-making of policy initiatives, this study captures actions that school leaders have taken to implement the policy and how these approaches may affect the academic achievement and post-secondary educational opportunity of their students. The study addresses Vietnamese school leaders’ responses to new
policy initiatives in a strictly top-down, centrally controlled education system—a rarely discussed topic in the educational leadership and policy implementation literature. Hence, I am especially interested in understanding how the school leaders’ sense-making and implementation process in Vietnam may differ from what has been described in the U.S.-based literature and beyond. This research not only provides a new contextual application of the cognitive framework, but it also sheds light on the process in which local policy implementation begins to deviate from the original policy intents and potentially overturns the logic of policymaking in a highly controlled environment. Furthermore, emphasizing how much social contexts matter in school leaders’ responses to the new policy, the study argues that local interpretation and implementation are bounded by and, simultaneously, perpetuate systemic inequities in education—an area that has not been a focal point of neither the cognitive framework nor previous educational studies using this framework.

Methodology

This article is based on the qualitative portion of a larger mixed-methods study—undertaken between late 2016 and early 2017—on Vietnamese students’ post-secondary educational expectations and aspirations. During my pilot study and initial recruitment process, I talked with several school leaders (i.e. principals and assistant principals), all of whom later participated in this study, about factors shaping students’ educational plans. Throughout these early discussions, I noticed that the topic of policy changes regarding the NHSE came up very often. These school leaders shared with me how recent policy initiatives have led to both challenges and opportunities in their everyday work, especially regarding preparing and orienting senior-year students for high school graduation and college entrance. Interestingly, although the
policy and policy messages were nationally standardized and uniformly distributed to all schools in this area, leaders whom I talked to expressed very different understandings and interpretations of the policy, leading to varied decisions and plans of action towards policy implementation. Inspired by these initial observations, I decided to add a subset of questions to the final interview protocol, targeting how school leaders interpret and implement the NSHE reform policy. This eventually produced the main data source for this article. Qualitative methods were applied to capture and explicate the complexity of cognitive reasoning behind school leaders’ sense-making in the policy implementation process.

**Research Site**

The study was conducted in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. Although historically known as one of the country’s largest urban, metropolitan hubs, in the aftermath of a policy in 2008, Hanoi extended its administrative boundary to include the outlining rural and suburban areas (CPVON, 2016). With this extension, school districts of Hanoi are greatly diverse in geographical location, size, urbanicity, and in the social and ethnic compositions of their student population. Yet, under a highly controlled educational system, all schools and districts in this area have been administered by a single office—the Ministry of Education and Training, Central Office of Hanoi (hereafter, Central Office). The Central Office is in charge of distributing information about policy initiatives and organizing meetings and training workshops for district and school leaders. These two factors create a unique set of conditions: variety in districts’ characteristics and uniformity in their administration. This situation provides a great opportunity for this study to examine school leaders’ sense-making in the policy implementation process. The rationales at work in this process become clear in the comparison between the consistent set
of policy signals (e.g., policy content, policy representation, how policy messages are
distributed) with local variation. This variation may be explained by the individual and situated
cognition of local school leaders in their interpretation and implementation of the policy.

Data Collection

Data used in this article were drawn from my in-person interviews with eleven school
leaders, whose schools participated in my larger mixed-methods study. Among those eleven
school leaders, seven were principals and four were vice principals. In addition, because the
Vietnamese MOET requires principals to teach two lessons per week and vice principals to teach
four lessons per week, all of these school leaders also served as teachers in their respective
subjects of expertise. (See Table 3 for a description of interview participants and their schools).

All interviews were performed in an open-ended, semi-structured format. Each interview
lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. In the interviews, I asked participants to share their
professional experiences, the unique characteristics of their schools and communities, their
thoughts on students’ post-secondary educational opportunity and access, their responses to
recent changes in the NHSE policy, and what they have done to prepare their senior-year
students for high school graduation and college. I specifically focused on how they made sense
of the new policy, on the rationales behind their understandings and interpretations, and on how
such understandings have influenced their decisions and action plans in policy implementation.

To get a better understanding of policy signals and how they have influenced school
leaders’ sense-making in this particular context, I also collected policy documents from the
Central Office, the MOET’s website, and mainstream media outlets. In addition, when visiting
participating schools, I asked school leaders to share key documents that they have received or
created that guided their policy implementation processes. With participants’ approval, I often took notes and when possible, made copies of these documents. In the study’s analysis, these documents contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of policy backgrounds, intents, and representations.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began in the ongoing process of data collection. During and immediately after each interview, I jotted down observations, issues, and patterns to pursue in the next interviews. For example, analysis of the first few interviews suggested that certain school characteristics, such as school ranking and overall student academic achievement, play important roles in school leaders’ responses to new policy initiatives. Hence, I probed this issue more in the following interviews. In addition, I continually analyzed policy documents and reflected updated information about policy changes to the interview protocol. By integrating data collection and data analysis, I was able to pursue the rationales behind each participant’s sense-making process and how they might be varied in different individual and situated contexts. This approach was especially helpful in strengthening my understandings of the cognitive framework and its applicability in practical circumstances.

Once the data collection was completed, all interview data were transcribed and translated into English. Subsequently, data were coded inductively and deductively in two sequential rounds. In the first round, I performed open coding, reading for major patterns that emerged from the transcripts and focusing on participants’ repetitive words and phrases to form initial codes and code clusters. For example, one of the major code clusters found in this round is “school leaders’ responses to exam policy changes,” which includes numerous codes recording
leaders’ nuanced understandings and interpretations of the new policy and their actions or action plans to implement this policy in their schools. In the second round of coding, mapping on the cognitive framework, I focused on aspects of the interviews that might explain participants’ sense-making in the policy implementation process. During this round, I created new codes and re-organized existing codes that further specified participants’ individual and situated cognition. I also noted major differences and similarities in sense-making across interview participants and began writing down major patterns.

Subsequently, I analyzed coded data using the thematic analytical approach, a process for encoding and analyzing qualitative information based on occurring themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Because interview participants were from different personal and professional backgrounds and worked in various school environments, the thematic approach allowed me to identify and compare themes across interviewees’ institutional and situational context. Mapping on the cognitive framework during the entire analytical process, I specifically focused on the last stage of developing thematic analysis— “interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 11)—to identify aspects that this study can contribute to the scholarly understanding of the cognitive framework and its application to school leaders’ sense-making in policy implementation.

In the following sections, I will sequentially discuss the study’s core findings in light of Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive framework. First, to capture the policy signal component of the framework, I will provide a brief description of recent changes to the NHSE and how these changes have been designed and represented to school leaders. Then, I will discuss how participants made sense of the new policy based on their individual and situated cognition, as well as actions that they have taken to implement the policy in their schools. The
article will conclude with a discussion of Vietnamese school leaders’ sense-making in policy implementation and the study’s implications to the field of educational leadership.
Table 3. Description of interviewees and their schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Interviewee pseudonym</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Subject taught</th>
<th>Time working in this school*</th>
<th>Time as leader of this school*</th>
<th>School pseudonym</th>
<th>School location**</th>
<th>School ranking***</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mr. Sinh</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Le An</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>12/21/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mr. Tien</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Dinh Bang</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>12/26/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mr. Ha</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Cao Truong</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>12/27/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mr. Tuan</td>
<td>Vice Principal</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Bang Thai</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>12/29/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ms. Nhan</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Phung Hai</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1/3/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mr. Phuoc</td>
<td>Vice Principal</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Bao Lam</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>1/5/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mr. Bao</td>
<td>Vice Principal</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Dong Ha</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1/5/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mr. Huy</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Industrial Technology</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Xa Chung</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>1/7/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mr. Van</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Anh Vinh</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>1/11/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mr. Thien</td>
<td>Vice Principal</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Xuan Ha</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1/13/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mr. Truong</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Ki Thanh</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1/16/17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
*Interviewee’s reported time of working and serving in leadership positions as of the interview date
** Location type approximated using a combination of MOET’s regional category and Hanoi administrative category
***School rank reported by school leaders based on school’s admission scores and students’ academic performances in relative comparison with other local schools
Policy Signals: Recent Reforms in Vietnam’s National High School Examination (NHSE)

Recent Reforms of the NHSE

To many Vietnamese senior students, the NHSE is one of the most important exams, if not the most important exam, of their lives. It is a high-stakes, nationally standardized test that occurs only once a year to determine students’ qualifications to graduate from high school and to access post-secondary education. Not only does it dictate most students’ educational future, but it can also impact their career trajectory and social mobility. As a result, competition among students to achieve high NHSE scores is fierce, especially for students who aspire to attend prestigious, public four-year universities.

While the meaning of the exam has remained essentially the same over time, its policy, structure, and content have shifted significantly since 2015. For decades prior to 2015, Vietnamese students took two separate, consecutive exams after completing their 12 years of schooling: the high school graduation exam and the college entrance exam. The high school graduation exam was designed to assess student knowledge and skills in important subjects of the high school curriculum (Tran, 2014). If their scores in this exam were high enough, senior students were qualified to graduate high school and to advance to the college entrance exam. The college entrance exam was designed to assess students’ advanced knowledge and skills in specific subjects that align with their college and major choices in order to select the best students for college enrollment (Tran, 2014).
Since 2015, the MOET has begun a new era of education reform with continuous, annual adjustments to the high school graduation and college entrance exams. The biggest change so far has been merging the high school graduation and college entrance exams into a single exam—the NHSE. The exam occurs once per year, often in July, and its scores can be used to determine students’ qualifications for both high school graduation and college entrance (Pham, 2015).

In addition to introducing the NHSE, the MOET continued making policy adjustments nearly every year. For example, in 2015, the MOET announced that exam takers could use their NHSE results to register in up to four majors within a college or university as their first choices. The following year, the options expanded again, allowing students to select their top two colleges and register in up to four majors in each one as their first choices. In 2017—the year that student participants of this study took the NHSE—exam takers had unlimited first choices of major and college. Also, in this year, the MOET made major revisions to the exam structures, such as converting most subject tests from the traditional written format to a multiple-choice format and changing the time allocated to each subject test. Although some policy adjustments were praised by the public for reducing the stress and cost of test taking for students and their families, frequent policy changes caused confusion, anxiety, and challenges for students, parents, teachers, and school leaders who struggled to keep up with new initiatives.

How Policy Changes Have Been Presented

In most official announcements issued by the MOET, the intent of policy changes has been consistently represented as the government’s efforts to “reduce stress and expenses for society; ensure reliability, transparency, objectivity [of the exam]; [and] accurately assess
students’ qualifications as the foundation for [post-secondary educational] admission” (e.g., MOET, 2017). Recent changes have been announced widely and promptly over mass media. However, policymakers tend not to explain the meaning of each policy change. In particular, they do not clearly indicate whether a new policy adjustment is permanent or temporary or how it may contribute to the overall intent of the reform agenda. Moreover, in recent years, changes occur very frequently and suddenly—sometimes even after students took the NHSE—making all stakeholders confused about the logic and stability of policy changes. Therefore, the NHSE policy is often seen as a top-down, vague, ever-changing, and provisional initiative.

Since the policy signals have been represented vaguely and inconsistently, the burden of policy interpretation has been placed on local educators, especially principals and vice principals, who are in charge of implementing policy changes at the school level. Meanwhile, school leaders work in different school and community contexts, and they hold unique experiences, beliefs, and expertise. Therefore, how they interpret and implement the policy can vary widely from one another—despite the fact that the NHSE reform is nationally standardized and centrally controlled by the MOET. This variation, in turn, may cause different outcomes in students’ college preparation and access. The following sections will delve deeply into the ways that leaders’ individual cognition and situated cognition have shaped their interpretation and implementation of the policy.

**Individual Cognition: Knowledges, Experiences, Beliefs, and Values in Sense-Making**

The study’s analysis revealed that although all school leaders received the same policy signals from the MOET, their understandings and interpretations of the reform were very
different. The ways in which they made sense of policy information had much to do with their prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values, which aligns with Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive framework on individual cognition. During the interviews, participants used their experiences and expertise both as leaders and teachers to explain NSHE policy changes, particularly, the reform’s overall spirit and intention, and the exam’s recent shift to a multiple-choice format. The majority of participants critiqued the reform for creating too frequent changes that were confusing, sudden, and stressful for both educators and students. Meanwhile, others normalized these frequent, small changes, explaining that changes were intentionally crafted that way to build scaffolds for a bigger policy agenda. These different interpretations led to variation in policy implementing approaches among participants. Notably, when discussing the reform, school leaders tended to focus on superficial, piecemeal changes, such as how often a new initiative is announced and new testing tactics students should practice to master the exam, rather than to consider the policy reform as a whole and delve deeply into its substantial impacts on teaching and learning.

School Leaders’ Understandings of Policy Reform

In our interviews, all school leaders provided a similar description of policy changes regarding the NHSE that year; however, their understandings of the policy were not uniform. While most leaders interpreted the constant changes of NHSE as signs of confusion, thoughtlessness, and uncertainty from policymakers, others considered these changes intentional and necessarily experimental steps by policymakers to achieve the end goals of Vietnam’s education reform. Regardless, when explaining the policy, participants often focused more on the
pace of policy changes, rather than the policy itself. This tendency stemmed from the fact that
the fast-paced changes of the reform have created profound impacts on participants’ everyday
experiences as school leaders. Because school leaders were in charge of communicating new
policy information to their staff, students, and parents, as well as making adjustments to help
their schools’ activities more align with the new policy, they felt it difficult to catch up with
changes occurring almost every year. Therefore, drawing on their preexisting knowledge and
experiences with policy changes, most school leaders complained about the pace of NHSE
reform. For example, Mr. Sinh, the principal of Le An High School said:

> Over the last three years, the national exam policy has changed every single year. Every
year come several new adjustments to the exam. More often, we only know about these
changes a semester before the school year ends [when senior-year students are about to
take the exam]. I really don’t understand what kind of exam organization that is! These
changes have made students more anxious and distracted from studying while they
already have enough to worry about. It’s very stressful!

(Interview, 12/21/2016 in Vietnamese)

In his statement, Mr. Sinh showed his frustration with the high frequency yet delayed
announcement of policy changes, which have caused more stress for him and his students as the
NHSE was approaching. His confusion about the direction of this policy initiative and the way in
which it was represented by policymakers was clearly shown in his exclamation: “I really don’t
understand what kind of exam organization that is!” Mr. Sinh was not the only school leader who
felt this way. During our interviews, many participants shared that even though they understood
the technical side of each and every policy change, they struggled to piece these changes together
to grasp the big picture of the policy. In other words, most school leaders interpreted the meaning
of each policy change as it occurred, but they could not make sense of where these changes
would lead them and what the ultimate destination of this reform would look like. Even in cases
where school leaders interpreted the intention of policymakers in creating frequent adjustments
as beneficial, they still critiqued the pace of policy shifting. Mr. Tien, the principal of Dinh Bang High School, claimed:

It’s extremely difficult to adjust [to policy changes] because the policy has changed almost every year. The government’s intentions to reform our testing system and make the college entrance exam less stressful for students are all good. However, it takes time for parents, teachers, and students to get familiar with those changes. It’s really hard to change everyone’s mindsets and approaches all of a sudden.

(Interview, 12/26/2016 in Vietnamese)

Unlike Mr. Sinh, who believed that recent policy changes have created more anxiety and distraction for students, Mr. Tien indeed acknowledged the reform’s intentions to reduce testing stress for students “are all good.” However, similar to Mr. Sinh and most school leaders participating in this study, Mr. Tien argued against the fast pace and suddenness of policy changes, which caused great challenges in teaching and learning adjustments. Later in our interview, Mr. Tien explained at length about his experiences with the reform. Many of these involved explaining the new policy to his unwilling students and their parents, encouraging them to shift their preexisting mindsets and adapt to the new policy, and convincing them to believe in the “all good” intentions of policymakers. Based on these rather unpleasant experiences and challenges he had to overcome to support and implement the policy, Mr. Tien claimed that even with good intentions, the reform changes should have occurred less frequently and less suddenly.

His experiences and opinions were shared by many school leaders in this study, who felt an overwhelming responsibility to communicate and translate the policy messages to their staff, students, and parents. Because these messages were constantly changing and relatively vague, it was up to local school leaders to interpret and to encourage others to follow. Due to this big burden, most school leaders interpreted the policy as well intended yet confusing, turbulent, and challenging to digest and implement. Given how top-down this reform was, some school leaders
also described a sense of disconnection with policymakers and disempowerment when implementing these policy initiatives. As local implementing agents, their voices seemed to be silenced throughout the policymaking process and they could only start making sense and reacting to the policy once it had been officially announced.

Besides critiques of the reform, some school leaders expressed a firm belief in the policy. In their own understandings and interpretations, the reoccurring, frequent, and sudden changes were intentionally designed within a bigger agenda to scaffold a complete reform in the near future. However, since this end goal has not been finalized and explicitly represented, it was up to local school leaders to maintain their belief in the system and make sense of each piecemeal change as they consider how it would fit the overall agenda. For instance, Mr. Huy, the principal of Xa Chung High School explained:

Mr. Huy: Actually, the policy has not been changing completely every year, but rather it carries necessary adjustments to lead the education reform toward more accurate standards. If the entire reform happened right in the beginning, it would be impossible to implement because some schools would not be able to catch up with and adjust to drastic changes. Therefore, the government needs to make small changes every year so that everyone can slowly catch up with the pace. I believe so. Everything happening right now indeed belongs to a bigger agenda.

Interviewer: A bigger agenda?

Mr. Huy: Yes. It’s an agenda to track progress. For example, in the first year, the reform focused on changing the exam policy and structure. In the past, students needed to take six subject tests to graduate from high school; now these tests have been replaced by three mandatory tests for high school graduation and one or two more elective tests for college admission. In the second year, which is this year, the reform has been focusing on the test format. This includes changing the formerly written tests to multiple-choice tests and shortening the amount of time offered in several tests. [...] The government and the Ministry [of Education and Training] know all the risks associated with change, so they decided to incorporate them into a gradual progression. [...] In a couple of years, the policy will focus more on instruction, lesson content, and so on. The textbooks may also be re-written. That would take more time. Changes have been and will be happening gradually.

(Individual Interview, 1/7/2017 in Vietnamese)
This statement demonstrated how Mr. Huy’s belief in the system has influenced his ways of interpreting the policy. As he believed that there was a bigger agenda behind each and every small policy change, he argued that policymakers choose to introduce changes yearly to help schools “catch up.” Interestingly, the “bigger agenda” with multiple steps he mentioned has not been officially announced by the MOET, but rather they were unofficial circulations from the Central Office and pieced together by some school leaders in their sense-making processes. Although Mr. Huy’s opinion was not popular among the study’s participants, some school leaders shared his belief. Because changes have occurred too often, they chose to normalize these changes and interpreted them as unavoidable parts of the reform process. School leaders, instead of complaining or fighting against policy changes, became familiar with and made sense of them in line with their belief in a bigger agenda pursued by policymakers.

**School Leaders’ Responses to Changing in Testing Format**

One of the most important changes of the 2016-2017 NHSE reform is the shift in testing format: in particular, several subject tests that used to be in written or hybrid format would turn entirely to multiple-choice (Hoang & Thanh, 2016). Among those subject tests, multiple-choice mathematics was very controversial. Traditionally presented in a written format, NSHE mathematics subject test required students to show all their work and thought processes leading to final answers. However, with the new multiple-choice format, students now are only required to circle correct answers. When the MOET first proposed this change in early 2016, many Vietnamese mathematicians and instructional experts expressed resistance (Le, 2016; Phuong, 2016; Thu, 2016; Vinh, 2016). They claimed that the written format has played an important role
in fostering students’ critical thinking, reasoning, and presenting skills—skills that helped many Vietnamese students stand out and win in international mathematical competitions (Phuong, 2016). The shift in testing format, according to those opponents, would not only require students and teachers to change their approaches to mathematical issues, but also to revamp their critical thinking process, reasoning, and revision of knowledge. Experts argued that such a major change would require substantial time for both teachers and students to adjust, practice, and master (Vinh, 2016). Textbooks and other pedagogical materials also need to be re-written to reflect the change. They suggested that the MOET wait for a few academic years before making the shift (Thu, 2016). However, amid all of these critiques, the MOET still pursued this proposal and introduced the multiple-choice testing format in the 2016-2017 NHSE. Affirming this decision, policymakers claimed that the change would help reduce stress in testing for students and in grading processes for examiners (Hoang & Thanh, 2016).

Discussion around the shift in testing format, especially in mathematics, came up very often in interviews with school leaders, many of whom were also mathematics teachers. Interestingly, unlike mathematicians and instructional experts who had raised their voices against the multiple-choice format, most school leaders focused on how the change would influence students’ test-taking tactics, rather than their mathematical knowledge and conceptualization. On the one hand, many school leaders explained at length how they and their teaching staff would coach students to practice multiple-choice questions, use different techniques to eliminate incorrect choices, and increase the speed of completing each question. On the other hand, they seemed to ignore—or at least, understate—how this format shift would uproot students’ critical thinking processes and their presentation of solutions, which they had been taught for years. As a result, some school leaders appeared to normalize this change, claiming that it has not interfered
in their schools’ regular teaching and learning activities. For example, Mr. Van, the principal of Anh Vinh High School shared in our interview:

Interviewer: This year, the mathematics test will become multiple-choice. As a school leader and also a math teacher, what impact you think this change may bring on your students?

Mr. Van: Not much. Everything essentially remains the same. The change is just normal. I even think that the multiple-choice format will make it easier for the students than the former written format did.

(Interview, 1/11/2017, in Vietnamese)

Drawing on his teaching and leading experiences, Mr. Van believed that regardless of the test format, the core mathematical knowledge that students work with would remain the same. Therefore, to him, “the change is just normal” or even easier for students because they are no longer required to show all of their work in writing, which would minimize the prospect of losing valuable scores in presentation. His opinion was shared by many school leaders participating in this study, who did not worry about the reconceptualization of school math teaching and learning as much as those mathematicians and instructional experts who protested the change. In some cases, school leaders did show their concerns over the new testing format, yet these concerns still centered around testing tactics. For example, Mr. Thien, a vice principal of Xuan Ha High School shared:

Mr. Thien: This year, most subject tests will become multiple-choice. This format has a major drawback because it will make many [underachieving] students feel that they no longer need to study hard—they can just randomly circle an answer and pray for their luck. Since the announcement of changes to the testing format, it has been very difficult [for us] to motivate our students to study.

Interviewer: Is that also the reason why your school offers extra tutoring hours for students?

Mr. Thien: Tutoring can only help some average-to-good students. These students know enough to take advantage of the [multiple-choice] test format to eliminate incorrect
answers, especially when they’re down to just a few choices. However, to students who have no idea about the answer, they can take it as a joke. Some students even kidded to me: “Teacher, this is like gambling! We will roll a dice and circle the answer!” [Shook his head] I found it very challenging [to motivate those students]”

(Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)

In this statement, Mr. Thien claimed that the multiple-choice format would lead to a negative attitude among unmotivated students, who felt that they could guess the correct answers without studying. However, for average-to-good students, he believed that the new format would indeed help them to get the correct answers faster. Similar to Mr. Van and most school leaders in this study, Mr. Thien’s interpretation of the policy and its impacts on students stemmed from his experiences with leading, teaching, and interacting with students.

By focusing only on testing strategy, many school leaders did not consider the shift in testing format a substantial change to teaching and learning practices, especially for high performing students. Almost none of them talked about the reconceptualization of knowledge and instruction. Addressing this phenomenon in their cognitive framework, Spillane and colleagues (2002) warned that local implementing agents’ tendency to interpret ambiguous policy messages based on their preexisting expectations and practices could lead to misunderstandings. They wrote:

[An] implication of the top-down nature of comprehension is that ideas may be seen as more familiar than they actually are […] Our usual approach to processing new knowledge is a conserving process, preserving existing frames rather than radically transforming them. New ideas either are understood as familiar ones, without sufficient attention to aspects that diverge from the familiar, or are integrated without restructuring of existing knowledge and beliefs, resulting in piecemeal changes in existing practice. (pp. 397-398)

Besides individual cognition components that might cause school leaders to misunderstand new policy ideas as familiar, hindering, and piecemeal changes, in this particular study, top-down policy representation was also an influencing factor. Because the shift in testing format was
announced just over one semester before the NHSE due date, school leaders had to react quickly to the change in order to prepare their students for the exam. Therefore, they did not have a sufficient amount of time to reflect upon and think deeply about the long-term impacts of this policy change but only to focus on testing tactics and quick fixes to deal with the change. As noted by Spillane and colleagues (2002): “People can be misled by superficial similarities in situations. Only with substantial expertise do they look beneath the surface to recognize deeper principles” (p. 400). In such a constantly changing, top-down policy climate like Vietnam, even with “substantial expertise,” most school leaders still need more time to make sense of new information and see past superficial features to implement the policy at a deeper level.

**Situated Cognition: Institutional Context and Sense-Making**

The study’s analysis showed that, similar to what Spillane and colleagues (2002) described in their cognitive framework about situated cognition, situational contexts play a crucial role in how school leaders make sense of the new policy. In this case, academic rankings and geographic locations of schools are key factors shaping leaders’ attitudes towards and interpretations of the recent NHSE policy changes. Because of systemic inequities embedded in these situational contexts, not only did the ways in which school leaders interpreted the new policy were very different from one another, but they also perpetuated educational inequities. The intersection between inequality and policy implementation was clearly evident in participants’ accounts of their responses to the new policy.

Most leaders in higher-ranking (i.e. high-performing) schools mentioned that the policy changes have not created any major challenges to their professional work and the overall
performance of their schools. They tended to normalize policy changes, citing that the change is just an unavoidable and anticipated part of any exam session. They rationalized that because their student’ foundation knowledge was solid enough to overcome any changes in the NHSE subject tests, there should be nothing to worry about. Furthermore, since most of these students often came from families having means and resources for after-school tutoring hours elsewhere, their teaching staff was not under too much pressure to help students adjust to new changes. The burden of interpreting and implementing new policy initiatives, therefore, seemed much less heavy for leaders of high-performing schools. For example, Mr. Truong, the principal of Ki Thanh High School shared in our interview:

Interviewer: What are some of your biggest concerns for the senior cohort this year?

Mr. Truong: So far, everything has been going as planned. In this school, there is nothing to worry about.

Interviewer: In many schools that I have visited, the school leaders showed great concern about changes in this year’s exam policy. Do these changes concern you at all?

Mr. Truong: No. In this school, we have experimented with these changes for a while, they are no strangers to us. During instructional trainings, we have discussed [the new policy] with teachers in order to implement the new exam format in small, regular tests throughout the school year for students to practice. I believe that Ki Thanh students are very excellent; they can do well on the exam in any format and structure. So, I don’t see any problem with the new policy.

(Individual Interview, 1/16/2017, in Vietnamese)

Mr. Truong had worked in many schools in different ranking levels and geographic locations before coming to Ki Thanh first as a teacher and then as a school leader 27 years ago. In this statement, it was clear that Mr. Truong did not show any concern about new policy changes because he strongly believed in the school’s teaching and learning quality. To him, the new changes were familiar—“we have experimented with these changes for a while.” But more importantly, by repeating phrases such as “in this school” and “Ki Thanh students,” he
emphasized the unique condition of his school that would help the policy implementation become seamless. With a confident belief in his students—"Ki Thanh students are very excellent; they can do well on the exam in any format and structure"—Mr. Truong did not see any major impact the new policy would cause for himself and his students, teachers, and staff. His statement, “I don’t see any problem with the policy,” expressed the same mindset I found in conversations with other leaders of high-performing schools. To most of them, the policy changes were deemed familiar and normal, either because they had expected and prepared for such changes or because their students had the means to promptly update and adjust their studies according to the new policy in various after-school tutoring services. Therefore, they did not feel much pressure to interpret and translate the policy messages to other stakeholders or to make drastic changes in their schools to implement the new policy.

In contrast, many leaders in lower-ranking (i.e. low-performing) schools shared their concerns and worries about the impacts that the new policy would bear on their students and teaching staff. To them, not only was the policy shift unfamiliar, but it also happened so abruptly that it disturbed the existing teaching and learning routines that they had worked hard to set up for their students. More than anything, they understood the academic struggle of their students, especially when adapting to the new policy and so believed that these changes were massive and influential. For example, Mr. Tien, the principal of Dinh Bang High School said:

Every school needs to adjust to policy changes but whether the process is easy or not depending on students’ academic performance. Schools that have high-performing students, they are doing just fine. But schools that serve low-performing students [like ours] are dying! To prepare our students for these changes, I had to make reports and proposals to the District’s Department of Education and asked their permission to organize tutoring classes exclusively for low-performing students. […] My teachers work extremely hard because many students here are not only low-performing but also ill-behaved. Teachers have to be very patient and positive to push students forward.

(Individual Interview, 12/26/2016 in Vietnamese)
In this statement, Mr. Tien acknowledged that school performance plays a decisive role in policy implementation at the local level because while high-performing schools can still thrive under any circumstances, low-performing schools “are dying” with constant changes in policy climate. The statement showed his frustration towards the unfairness of the policy. It appeared that while the policy was nationally standardized, its implementation could not be uniform at the local level because schools’ conditions were vastly different. While leaders in high-performing schools did not feel the pressure to prepare their students for the newly reformed NHSE, leaders in low-performing schools like Mr. Tien had to work hard to make sure their students understood the new policy, adjusted to changes, and got ready for the exam day. This process often involved the entire school staff, especially teachers. In our interviews with leaders and teachers in low-performing schools, they often talked at length about their struggles to make up for the lack of information and academic support that their students had experienced. Particularly, because in these contexts, the school was often the only source of information and academic preparation for students and their parents, teachers and leaders needed to step up to take full responsibility to orient, teach, and tutor students for the NHSE. Therefore, with a new change made to the exam policy came a new challenge for teachers and leaders in low-performing schools. Policy changes, to them, were often interpreted as impactful, concerning, and even harmful to schools’ functions.

In addition to academic ranking, schools’ geographic location was a key factor that shaped school leaders’ responses to the new policy. The study’s analysis revealed that leaders in urban schools were less concerned about the new policy than their colleagues in non-urban schools, especially those located in rural, remote areas. This is because rural schools in Vietnam often have less access to information and resources compared to their urban counterparts (Attfield & Vu, 2013; Cueto et al., 2016); rural school leaders are under greater pressure to
bridge the achievement gap and help their students compete in the standardized NHSE.

Therefore, the new policy changes were seen as more drastic and influential to rural/non-urban school leaders than urban school leaders. Touching on the subject of regional inequality, Mr. Ha, the principal of Cao Truong, a high-performing school in the suburban area of Hanoi, shared in our interview:

Interviewer: Are you concerned that the test results [of Cao Truong senior-year students] this year will be lower because of the new exam format, particularly the multiple-choice option for the math test?

Mr. Ha: Our school is concerned about that matter. However, we aren’t afraid because it’s actually simple. The exam is nationally standardized, meaning that if it’s difficult, it will be difficult for all students nationwide; when everyone has a lower test score, the college admission scores will likely be lower. [I told my students.] if other students in mountainous, remote areas can make it, we can make it, too. Don’t be afraid, just fight! As the school principal, I do worry but I’m not afraid. The test result may not be as high as other years but our advantages compared to other schools in other regions would likely remain the same.

(Individual Interview, 12/27/2016 in Vietnamese)

Viewing the NHSE as a competition among students from different regions, Mr. Ha argued that his students, who were in the suburban, well-resourced areas of Hanoi, would have the advantage over students in rural, under-resourced areas. He used this as a reason to motivate his students—“if other students in mountainous, remote areas can make it, we can make it, too.”

Similar to Mr. Ha, other school leaders of non-rural schools also expressed their awareness of the advantages that their students possess thanks to their residential locations, such as wider access to information and technology and more private tutoring opportunities. These inherited advantages often help non-rural students self-adjust to new policy changes without much accommodation and guidance from school leaders and teachers. Therefore, non-rural school leaders generally appeared calm and receptive when responding to the new policy.

Meanwhile, interviews with rural school leaders showed that they were greatly concerned and
anxious about the new policy. Because educational resources in rural areas have been very limited, any minor policy change could cause serious setbacks in the school’s effort to prepare their students for high school graduation and college entrance. Most of them, therefore, expressed a shared frustration towards the fast pace of policy changes regarding NHSE. They were also more involved with the process of translating and communicating the policy message to teachers, students, and parents. Thus, school leaders’ interpretation of the new policy appeared to matter more in rural contexts than in urban and suburban contexts.

Implementation: School Leaders’ Action Plans to Work with Changes

School leaders’ understandings and interpretations of the new policy shaped how they implemented changes in their schools. This was demonstrated in their approaches to (1) communicating policy information to students, teachers, and other school staff, (2) organizing exam preparatory activities which corresponded to policy changes, and (3) orienting students towards different post-secondary educational goals. Interviews with school leaders revealed that their individual and situated cognition continued to shed light on their action plans to implement policy changes, potentially creating different educational trajectories for their students.

Communicating Policy Changes

Keeping up with constant and sudden policy changes is no easy task. Interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students revealed that while changes have occurred frequently over the last five years, most stakeholders anticipated these changes and so always looked out for new information. Often, before the information of a policy shift was officially released to schools via
the Central Office’s information channel, rumors of the shift had been circulating for months on
mass media. Therefore, students often obtained new, unofficial information from the internet—
information that school leaders and teachers were sometimes unaware of or unable to confirm.
This put great pressure on school leaders and teachers to always be up-to-date on new policy
initiatives, to process new information quickly, and to provide students with accurate information
and guidance. For example, Ms. Xuan, an English teacher at Anh Vinh High School, said:

    I feel that students nowadays are very information-savvy. Sometimes, they know about
    new policy changes even before teachers or school leaders do. Many students have
    Facebook accounts and smartphones, and they share information online on a regular
    basis. So, if teachers do not pay attention to new policy updates, we will fall behind our
    students.

    (Interview, 1/11/2017, in Vietnamese)

Similarly, Mr. Phuoc, a vice principal of Bao Lam High School, shared:

    Actually, our students get the information very quickly on their own; all policy changes
    from the Ministry have been communicated broadly via the press and social media. In the
    first period of every week, we also update students and faculty with new information. The
    students know that it’s crunch time now and that they have to be on top of things before
    it’s too late.

    (Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

The acknowledgment of students’ ability to access new policy information independently
was a common theme across school leaders’ interviews regarding policy communication. While
most participants considered this an advantage, as it encouraged students to actively look for new
policy information and develop strategies to adapt to any policy changes, the others were
concerned that information abundance might distract students from their main task: to study.
Furthermore, because some information circulated on the internet was neither accurate nor
appropriately interpreted, most school leaders emphasized the importance and urgency of
offering students and their parents reliable information sources with well-articulated guidance. In
order to do that, shortly after receiving an official policy announcement from the Central Office,
principals held meetings with teaching and administrative leadership teams to unpack the information, interpret it, and make action plans that reflect these changes in their schools’ everyday practices. In that way, both school leaders and teachers could be on the same page before spreading policy information to students and their parents. To further ensure that all senior students received the same version of policy interpretation, followed by specific guidance and orientation geared towards the NHSE and college application process, most school leaders routinely organized cohort-wide information sessions. These sessions often occurred in the first or final period of each week or during the career orientation class. For instance, Mr. Phuoc shared about his school’s approach to policy communication:

During the application season, our principal always organizes an orientation day for all senior students, in which he discusses the exam policy, new adjustments, and how to best prepare for high school graduation and college application. In parent-teacher meetings, we also discuss key elements of the policy initiative so that parents understand what is going on with the recent changes. We encourage parents to do their own research on the new policy and to discuss it frequently with their children.

(Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

These orientation sessions were very important and beneficial to senior students, especially those in rural areas whose schools served as the main, if not the only, information source of policy initiatives. Interviews with rural students revealed that because they neither knew many people having college experiences nor had the opportunity to visit their targeted colleges—mostly located in urban areas—in-person to gather information, many relied solely on schools’ orientation sessions to prepare for their college applications. Meanwhile, interviews with urban students revealed that they had many additional channels to obtain rich information about NHSE policy and college application—such as colleges’ information fairs, campus tours, and public seminars and workshops with current college students and alumni—because they
lived near these colleges. Given rural students’ limited access to direct information, the communication between leaders/teachers and students was vital in the rural school context.

**Test Preparation Corresponding to Changes**

The most important task of policy implementation, according to many participants, was to prepare their students for the newly reformed NHSE. To help students become familiar with the new testing format, most school leaders asked teachers to incorporate the changes (e.g., multiple-choice format, length of each subject test, time allowed to complete the test) into small exams and term papers throughout the school year. In order to ensure changes were made across all subject areas, school leaders distributed their leadership to teacher leaders who were in charge of each subject. This task required close interactions among school leaders, teacher leaders, and teacher team members. In most schools, school leaders held meetings with the teacher team of each subject, often led by a teacher leader, to collectively decide how to execute the policy implementation plan. Mr. Tuan, the principal of Bang Thai High School, shared:

> Our school has been taking several steps to prepare our students for the exam changes. For example, in the month leading up to the school mid-term exams, we have all teachers of the same subject group work together to create an “exam bank” (ngắn hàng đề) with questions mapped onto the new test’s format and structure. Based on this bank, teachers will adjust their lesson content and instructional approaches to prepare their students for the term exams and, at the same time, the NHSE. This means that whenever a change occurs to the exam, the teaching and learning approaches will have to change accordingly. It has always been this way.

(Interview, 12/29/2017, in Vietnamese)

By saying, “It has always been this way,” Mr. Tuan referred to the common practice of altering teaching and assessment activities to correspond to policy changes. “Teaching to the test,” therefore, was a theme that emerged across interviews with school leaders and teachers, most of
whom believed that mirroring the NHSE in everyday teaching and assessment was the best strategy to prepare their students academically. As another participant claimed: “Everything revolves around the test!” School leaders worked closely with teacher teams to deliberately incorporate their policy interpretation and implementation into each subject group. Leadership tasks were not solely centered on principals and vice principals but rather broadly distributed to teachers in both formal and informal leadership roles.

In addition to corresponding policy changes to schools’ routine exams, some schools also offered extra tutoring hours to help underachieving students to get used to changes of the NHSE and to practice them more diligently after school. This strategy was most common in under-resourced schools with a larger percentage of underperforming students who had less access to private tutoring compared to those of other schools. In these contexts, school leaders and teachers often worked extremely hard to level the playing field and to provide more equitable opportunities for their students. Mr. Tien at Dinh Bang High School shared:

In this school, because we acknowledge that our students are underperforming [compared to those in other schools], we propose and report to the Central Office about the students’ needs to have extra tutoring hours to prepare for the National High School Examination. Since its establishment, this school has always organized tutoring hours in the afternoon, which has proven helpful for students who wish to improve their academic performance. We also try to provide opportunities for students to do practice tests as much as possible.

Every teacher needs to take responsibility to help their students improve, one step at a time, leading to the important day of the Exam. In other schools, when the school year is over, students may not be required to attend extra tutoring hours. However, in this school, students still need at least two weeks before the week of the Exam to study and practice more. This is often the most productive time for our students because it is when they start feeling worried about their performance and future. As they care more, they will likely gain more knowledge.

(Individual Interview, 12/26/2016 in Vietnamese)

In his statement, it was clear that Mr. Tien was well aware of his school’s position and academic struggles, as he repetitively made comparisons between “this school” and “other schools.”
Knowing that his students needed more support to prepare for the NHSE, Mr. Tien initiated the plan of offering extra tutoring hours, asked permission from the Central Office, and encouraged teachers to take responsibility for their students’ academic improvement. He claimed that this strategy has helped the students a great deal in staying focused and motivated as they prepared for the upcoming NHSE—an observation shared by many other leaders in a similar institutional context.

In addition, the burden of offering extra tutoring hours for underachieving students was much heavier in remotely rural schools, such as Xuan Ha High School and Bao Lam High School, where students did not have the same access to many private tutoring centers as their urban peers. They solely relied on school programs to prepare for the NHSE. The interview with Xuan Ha High School’s vice principal and teachers revealed that because the school location was very remote, teachers needed to take turns to teach after-school hours and had to stay at school overnight to continue teaching normal hours the next morning. Moreover, because most students in Xuan Ha High School were from low-income families with little or no money to contribute for after-school programs, their teachers did not have any significant extra payments for working more hours. In order to motivate their teachers to continue working without monetary incentives, school leaders at Xuan Ha High School focused on providing emotional support and encouragement to their teachers in everyday professional and social interactions. Overall, although many schools could share similar implementing strategies, such as alternating teaching and assessment activities corresponding to policy changes and offering after-school tutoring hours, the level of difficulty in executing these plans was always higher in under-resourced, remote, rural schools.
Orientation of Post-Secondary Educational Opportunities

In Vietnam, most schools do not have any staff members who are in charge of providing post-secondary educational and career advice to students (e.g., equivalent to the school counselor in many Western high schools). Therefore, school leaders and teachers, especially homeroom teachers, often take up this responsibility. Since the NHSE policy has changed very frequently over the last five years, the orienting strategies of school leaders and teachers have also been altered to reflect current policy changes. This is one of the biggest reasons why leaders’ understandings and interpretations of the new policy initiatives are vital because they are directly linked to the advice that they give to students. That advice can influence the students’ post-secondary education and career choices in the long term.

“Apply straight to college.” During the interviews with school leaders, many of them shared that the advice they give students about post-secondary education has changed significantly in response to the new policy initiatives. Most leaders interpreted the recent changes (e.g., the merger of graduation and college entrance exams, the shift in testing formats, the new procedure of selecting colleges) as major challenges to adjust, especially in under-resourced schools. However, they also acknowledged that the new initiative has opened up new opportunities for students to enter the post-secondary educational level. Several school leaders explained that because the new policy required students to take only one exam for both high school graduation and college entrance, it streamlined the process of applying for college. Furthermore, because now students are allowed to include as many college choices as they would like in their applications (compared to only a few choices in the past), the policy helped boost students’ aspirations for college. Thus, embracing the advantages of the new policy, many
school leaders advised students to aim high—focusing on college entrance as their post-secondary educational priority. For instance, Mr. Sinh, the principal of Le An High School said:

[With the new exam policy,] my preference is to consult and encourage all students to apply straight to college. I told them: “It’s better to risk your high school graduation chance to have a higher possibility to enter college, rather than graduating from high school but then going nowhere.” Therefore, I oriented all students to focus on their college scores, not their graduation scores…

(Individual Interview, 12/21/2016, in Vietnamese)

Mr. Sinh’s advice to “apply straight to college” was shared by many other school leaders participating in this study. They explained that in the past when students were required to take two separate exams—one for high school exit and another for college entrance—they often told students to focus on the high school exit exam first and then to shift gears to the college entrance exam after graduating high school. However, with the merger of the two exams, they believed it would be better for their students to aim higher with the ultimate goal of entering college. As Mr. Sinh claimed: “It’s better to risk your high school graduation chance to have a higher possibility to enter college, rather than graduating from high school but then going nowhere.”

“Sending the best students to colleges abroad.” While most school leaders shared a common goal of preparing their students for the NHSE so that they could enter colleges and universities in Vietnam, a few other leaders had a different plan for their students: study abroad. These leaders shared that because the Vietnamese policy towards college entrance has changed so much over the last few years, it has created major uncertainties and unpredictable elements that impact the students’ chances to get into their first choices for college. Meanwhile, the college admission policies in foreign countries are more liberal, straight-forward, and stable, which allow students to prepare their applications and apply to colleges abroad, no matter where they are in the world. With this intention, these school leaders developed different programs and
partnerships with foreign institutions that would generate post-secondary educational opportunities abroad for students as alternatives to taking the NHSE to colleges and universities in Vietnam. For example, speaking about a unique program at Phung Hai High School—a high-achieving school in urban Hanoi capital—the principal, Ms. Nhan said:

The unique feature that makes Phung Hai stand out from other public high schools is our International Program. Students enrolling in the International Program simultaneously study the standard Vietnamese high school curriculum and another curriculum designed by our foreign high school partner. These students also focus on studying for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and by senior year, they will all take the IELTS test. Our students’ IELTS baseline is 5.5/9.0. In the most recent IELTS test, approximately 18% of senior students scored 7.5/9.0 and above. The students can use this IELTS result to apply for schools and scholarships abroad.

The International Program has been geared towards students who plan to study abroad, students who want to study English intensively, and students who plan to enter international partnership programs at certain colleges and universities in Vietnam. These three types of students are the main targets of the program. Our International Program’s model focuses on training students to be active in extracurricular activities, community work, and volunteer services. Students are also encouraged to initiate and organize events and other life-skill or soft-skill activities at school… This is a very special program!

(Interview, 1/3/2017, in Vietnamese)

By attending the International Program, Phung Hai students have more options for post-secondary education, such as studying abroad or attending the international partnership programs at certain Vietnamese colleges, as alternatives to attending regular college programs in Vietnam. Since most of these alternative options do not require an NHSE score, students’ college plans are less likely to be affected by the changing policy. Ms. Nhan noted that the stability of foreign/international partnership application processes helps students stay focused and stress-free. Moreover, having the pressure of studying and preparing for the NHSE lifted off, senior students in the International Program have more time and opportunity to engage with extracurricular activities, events, and workshops that help build their non-academic skills. Many of their peers in regular programs do not have these opportunities.
Despite lacking resources to organize a separate program that prepares students for international opportunities like Phung Hai, Mr. Ha—the principal of Cao Truong—also had a vision of sending his best students to colleges abroad. In his interview, he shared that when he first began his position as a school leader at Cao Truong (almost 14 years ago), he only focused on helping his students to pass the NHSE to get into colleges and universities in Vietnam—a goal shared by most Vietnamese high school leaders. However, after establishing some partnerships with foreign colleges and traveling abroad for professional training, Mr. Ha realized that he could break the endless cycle of following after and adjusting to the NHSE policy changes for both his students and himself. This goal could be achieved by offering a post-secondary educational alternative: to attend college abroad. Knowing that the majority of students in Cao Truong cannot afford expensive international tuitions, Mr. Ha focused on bringing full or partial scholarships to his best students. He said:

Every year, our school invites representatives of colleges and universities in South Korea, Japan [and other countries in Asia] to visit and test the students. They give our students IQ tests, subject tests, and writing assignments in English. Based on these test results, they will award the best performing students scholarships. Scholarship recipients will then attend information sessions about study abroad opportunities, tuitions, fees, length of studies, etc. If the students and their families agree with the costs and conditions, they can proceed to complete their applications to these colleges and universities. [...] Last year, our students received two full scholarships from Taiwan, one full scholarship from South Korea, one full scholarship from Australia, and seven 70% scholarships and seventeen 50% scholarships from different sources. [...] I used my personal networks abroad to find these opportunities and brought them here for all students.

Mr. Ha’s creativity and intuition for professional networking have made a big difference for Cao Truong students’ future in terms of post-secondary educational opportunities. Moreover, our interviews with Cao Truong teachers and students revealed that Mr. Ha’s leading international partnership program provided all students valuable learning opportunities, even those who did not receive any scholarships to study abroad. These benefits include free foreign language
courses and free college and career consultancy from international experts. Both Cao Truong teachers interviewed in this study highly praised Mr. Ha for his vision and effort to broaden students’ post-secondary educational options. They claimed that, thanks to Mr. Ha, many students have been given educational opportunities that they would not have had otherwise.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In summary, drawing on Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive framework, this study examines how Vietnamese school leaders made sense of policy changes of the NHSE—a nationwide examination that determines students’ high school graduation and access to post-secondary education. Despite being nationally standardized and promptly announced over mass media, the NHSE reform’s messages, especially its long-term indications, have not been represented clearly to local implementing agents—the school leaders. School leaders participating in this study asserted that they were not involved in the policy-making process and could only start making sense of and responding to the policy once it had been enacted. In addition, because major changes have occurred very frequently and suddenly over the last few years, it has been very difficult for school leaders to follow, interpret, and communicate the policy messages to other stakeholders. Due to this lack of clarity, engagement, and stability in policy design and representation, most study participants saw the NHSE policy as a top-down, confusing, and provisional initiative. Yet given how centrally controlled the Vietnamese policy climate is, school leaders have no other choice but to implement the policy as it is represented, whether they believe or disbelieve in the system.
However, the gap between policy and implementation persists, followed by an exacerbation of educational inequity. The study’s analysis revealed that during their sense-making process, school leaders’ interpretations and implementations of the new policy were shaped by their individual cognition—their knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values—as well as their situated cognition—their schools’ academic rankings and geographic locations. Expanding from Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) framework, this study further argues that school leaders’ individual cognition and situated cognition do not function separately but rather, that they intertwine throughout entire sense-making process. In this particular case, because Vietnamese schools and communities shared unequal educational and socioeconomic resources, school leaders’ individual cognition was bound up in the inequity embedded in their situated cognition. This relationship created an intersection between structural inequities and policy interpretation and implementation. In other words, the ways in which school leaders interpreted and implemented policy were not only shaped by, but also perpetuated structural inequities in education.

The more abstract policy messages are, the more individual cognition of school leaders seems to matter in sense-making. In this context, participating school leaders took on a burdensome responsibility for interpreting policy initiatives, not only for themselves, but also for their teachers, staff, students, and parents. However, because policy changes occurred too frequently and were only announced shortly before the NSHE due date, school leaders had to respond in an urgent mode. Most participants did not have adequate time to think past piecemeal changes of the reform to delve into the profound impacts that the reform would have for their students and for the Vietnamese education at large. Therefore, major implementing strategies focused on “teaching to the test,” revolving around test-taking skills and tactics to familiarize
students with the new testing format, rather than on crucial shifts in knowledge and learning. Similar issues have been observed and documented in previous studies conducted in the United States (e.g., Booher-Jennings, 2005; Oberfield, 2016; Spillane, 2000; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

This problem calls for more long-term policy designs and clearer policy representations. Policymakers need to take steps to structure and establish lasting changes and to reflect their visions clearly in policy messages sent out to local implementing agents. In that way, even when a new policy change is only an initial step of a larger reform, local implementing agents are able to see it in a big picture and have a better understanding of the reform as a whole. Having a wider vision, they are more likely to see past temporary, piecemeal changes and to take implementing actions that account for the long-term effects on their students.

In addition to individual cognition, school leaders’ sense-making in the policy implementation process was greatly influenced by their institutional contexts—their situated cognition (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Chief among those influential factors were the school’s academic ranking and geographic location, which are heavily shaped by socioeconomic inequities. Leaders from high-performing schools tended to normalize changes and believed that those changes would not make any major difference in schools’ teaching and learning activities. Meanwhile, leaders from low-performing schools overtly showed their worries and concerns towards the teaching and learning quality at their schools—in their opinion, changes following this new policy would be massive. Leaders of urban, well-resourced schools were less concerned about and more receptive to policy changes compared to those of non-urban, under-resourced schools. School leaders’ responses to NHSE, therefore, were shaped by and further perpetuated the existing structures of inequity. Moreover, the fact that school leaders were often surrounded
by colleagues of the same school ranking level and geographic location also created some sorts of regional “thought communities,” in which school leaders socialized and shared their knowledge, beliefs, and opinions. The embedded characteristics, knowledge, and belief systems of these thought communities also shaped how school leaders made sense of and responded to new policy changes.

Given that the NSHE policy shift was nationally standardized, it would theoretically have similar effects on all schools and locations. However, because educational resources and access to post-secondary education differ vastly across Vietnam, school leaders’ responses to policy varied depending on their situational contexts. Although variation in sense-making due to situational cognition is a common pattern that has been observed in many institutional and societal contexts (see a review in Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002), the case of Vietnam further emphasizes the impact of social and educational inequity on school leaders’ sense-making. Limited resources designated for additional teaching, tutoring, and orienting hours for senior students have led to anxiety for leaders of low-performing and/or rural schools when facing a change in educational policy. To them, a change—even a minor one—would likely mean significant extra hours of work and effort from them and their teaching staff to accommodate their students, who have already been at a great disadvantage compared to their peers in high-performing and/or non-rural schools.

Therefore, when introducing a new policy, it is very important for policymakers to acknowledge social and educational inequities as factors of policy sense-making and implementation at the local levels. Ideally, to accommodate for equity gaps across schools and geographic locations, policymakers can issue separate agendas to different groups of schools, which might allow leaders of traditionally underserved schools more time and resources to
interpret and implement the policy. For example, an additional fund for after-school activities would be very helpful for rural school leaders to hold timely staff meetings and teacher-parent conferences that discuss policy changes, to offer tutoring hours for students in need, and to organize regular college and career orientations for students that are going to take the NHSE at the end of their senior year.

Another contribution of this study to the existing scholarship on school leaders’ sense-making is its focus on the *real-life* actions that school leaders took during their policy implementation process. The data demonstrated that school leaders’ individual and situated cognition continue shaping their approaches in communicating policy information to stakeholders, organizing exam preparatory activities corresponding to policy changes, and orienting students towards various postsecondary educational goals. For example, many school leaders shared similar approaches to NHSE preparation, such as offering tutoring classes and using school midterm and final exams as a mechanism to familiarize students with the new test format. However, their interpretations of policy changes as advantages or disadvantages to their students influenced their attitudes towards the NHSE and the visions they had for their students regarding college and career orientations. Particularly, two school leaders in this study focused on developing foreign language programs and institutional partnerships to send their students abroad as an alternative to taking the seemingly ever-changing NHSE to enter colleges in Vietnam. Stakeholders benefiting from this approach applauded these school leaders’ initiatives to open an unconventional, but arguably, more promising college pathway for their high-achieving students. This positive feedback suggests a potential connection between school leaders’ visions and students’ college opportunities.
Given that school leaders’ actions are influenced by their individual and situated cognition and these actions may have a direct impact on students’ achievement and opportunity, there should be an organized effort to gather school leaders from different institutional contexts. Through such a professional learning platform, school leaders could share their courses of action to tackle the NHSE policy changes and what the students’ outcomes look like in their respective schools. This opportunity will likely help school leaders exchange information and knowledge among each other while having proper knowledge about situational differences across schools to adapt new ideas to their institutional contexts. In addition, when designing and announcing a new policy, policymakers need to consider creating space for school leaders to be creative with their implementation plans. This may mean allowing the leaders to establish partnerships with private and foreign entities and to explore unconventional approaches to help the students achieve their postsecondary educational goals.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of the study was its inability to directly measure the impact of school leaders’ sense-making and implementing actions on students’ academic outcomes. Interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students suggested that in several schools, students were more motivated to apply to college and gained access to more college opportunities thanks to their school leaders’ guidance. However, because most of this information was self-reported, it was difficult to determine exactly if and how the school leader’s implementation was correlated with the student’s outcomes. Future research that includes longitudinally statistical data comparing
students’ outcomes before and after school leaders’ policy implementation processes across different schools would address this limitation.

In addition, while Spillane and colleagues’ cognitive framework is helpful to understand how school leaders’ individual cognition and situated cognition have shaped their sense-making and implementation of a new policy, the framework does not explain if and how school leaders’ cognition might be different when they are also teachers. Under the current Vietnamese policy, school leaders are required to teach their subjects of expertise several hours per week; therefore, all leaders participating in this study are active teachers. From the analysis, there was evidence suggesting that school leaders teaching major subjects that are often included in the NHSE (e.g., Mathematics, English) tended to have stronger opinions about changes related to the testing format than those teaching minor, non-NHSE related subjects (e.g., Computer Science, Industrial Technology). This is an interesting observation because previous research has suggested that Vietnamese school leaders are more attentive to their managerial and political roles than to their instructional leadership roles (Hallinger & Truong, 2014). However, because the study’s sample size was too small to make a comparison between these two school leaders/teachers’ groups, the evidence was not sufficient to make a strong argument. Future research with a larger sample size can delve deeper into this matter and potentially extend the cognitive framework to explain the complexity in cognition of school leaders who also serve as teachers of the same schools.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the process through which Vietnamese school leaders interpret and implement a new policy that plays a crucial role in students’ access to postsecondary education. Positioned within the highly centralized educational context of Vietnam, the study explains how school leaders’ individual and situated cognition shape their understandings of the policy and create variations in its implementation,
despite the government’s effort to nationally standardize the policy. The study provides a more contextual application of Spillane and colleagues’ (2002) cognitive framework, which has been primarily applied to U.S. educational research. The research findings could be applicable to other countries with similar centralized educational systems and nationally standardized policy towards college entrance.
References


Chapter 4

Going or Not Going to College? Explaining the College Expectation Gaps Between Rural and Non-Rural Vietnamese High School Students

Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines the college expectations of rural and non-rural students in Hanoi, Vietnam. Findings from a survey of approximately 4,000 senior-year high school students and interviews with 76 students, teachers, and school leaders revealed a generally high number of students expecting to go to college. However, a significant gap in college expectations persisted across geographical locations; the number of students planning to apply to college was significantly lower in rural areas than non-rural areas. This was a result of major inequities in socioeconomic backgrounds, social support, educational resources, and employment opportunities inherited in student’s places of living. The study contributes new perspectives to the long-standing scholarly debates over factors attributing to students’ college expectations and provides nuanced explanations for rural-urban disparities in college-going decisions.
Introduction

College expectation – the plan and perceived likelihood to attend college (Brumley Russell, & Jaffee, 2019; Khattab, 2015)\(^3\) – is one of the most important factors that defines youth’s educational and occupational outcomes (Bryan, 2017; Khattab, 2015; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Swell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970). Research has consistently shown that students who think it is more likely that they will attend college tend to put more effort into their coursework (Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011) and participate in more extracurricular activities (Beal & Crockett, 2010), which explains their relatively higher academic performance in high school (Khattab, 2015) and greater educational attainment in adulthood (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Villarreal, Heckhausen, Lessard, Greenberger, & Chen, 2015). College expectations also promote college attendance (Brumley et al., 2019; Bryan, Farmer-Hinton, Rawls, & Woods, 2017). Youth and adolescents who have higher educational expectations also tend to have higher occupational expectations (Schmitt-Wilson, 2012), which can lead to their higher occupational attainment as adults (Sewell et al., 1969, 1970). Particularly for rural youth, college expectations are closely related to their migration decisions (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Liu, Shen, Wu, & Wang, 2017; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Tieken, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to examine the differences in college expectations between rural and non-rural youth to determine if and how their geographical locations affect college-going decisions—decisions that potentially lead to variations in their life course outcomes. Although similar topics have been studied in both

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\(^3\) Although the terms and constructs of college expectation and college aspiration are sometimes used interchangeably, these concepts are distinguishably different (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Khattab, 2015). While aspirations are abstract statements that refer to idealistic values and beliefs regarding future plans, expectations involve realistic assessment of the likelihood that future plans will be achieved based on concrete values and empirical realities (Khattab, 2015). In this study, because the survey and interview questions targeting students’ college plans were specific, it is more appropriate to use the term college expectation rather than aspiration.
developed and developing worlds (e.g., Hu, 2003; Li, 2019, Matějů, 2007; Wei, Zhou, & Yang, 2019), there has not been any study on rural/non-rural college expectations in Vietnam.

Vietnam is among several Asian countries that share the Confucian ideology in which education is considered the most legitimate way to gain upward mobility (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Pham & Fry, 2002; Welch, 2010). A college degree, especially from a prestigious public university, is often associated with higher social statuses and employment opportunities (Choi & Nieminen, 2013). As a result, it is a common understanding that Vietnamese students generally have a strong desire to go to college. However, access to public colleges and universities has been limited (Goyette, 2012). To be considered for college admissions, all students need to take a highly competitive annual entrance examination. A report by the World Bank in 2008 noted that only one in ten students who take the entrance examination was placed in a college or university (World Bank, 2008). In 2019, it was reported that the college enrollment rate for young adults in Vietnam is 28.3%, one of the lowest rates in the world (Tran, 2019). Over the last decade, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has consistently reformed the college admission policy—an effort advocated as a way to broaden access to higher education for Vietnamese students, especially students from remotely rural underserved areas. Some of these changes include merging the high school exit exam and the college entrance exam into a single National High School Examination (NSHE), simplifying the exam-taking processes, and allowing students to have multiple college and major choices (MOET, 2017). In addition, to account for inequality in access to education, a longstanding affirmative action policy has been in place to give underprivileged students extra points in their college entrance/NHSE scores. In the year this study was conducted, students residing in non-urban areas earned extra 1-1.5 points towards their NHSE scores (MOET, 2016).
Despite the efforts of Vietnamese MOET to open access to higher education, research is uncertain about the effectiveness of these reforms and affirmative action plans for rural students. Particularly, little is known about whether the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students has been closed. Having a solid understanding of this important topic will benefit Vietnamese educational stakeholders in nurturing the postsecondary educational expectations and outcomes of both rural and non-rural students. Furthermore, it will provide a lens into the educational expectations of students in a modern Confucian society—observations that may be applicable to other East Asian countries sharing the same cultural values. More broadly, research on this topic will contribute to current literature on both college expectations in general and rural/non-rural disparities in college expectations in particular by adding new contexts and nuances to the body of scholarship that has been heavily Western centric. Accordingly, by looking into students’ plans of applying to college, this study examines the college expectations of students in greater Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study addresses the overall patterns of college-going among the students, their motivations for going or not going to college, and factors that shape their decisions. The research questions are as follows: (1) What are the overall college expectations of students in greater Hanoi? (2) How are students’ geographic locations associated with their college expectations? (3) Besides location, what are some of the most important factors shaping students’ college expectations? and (4) Why do students decide to apply to college or not? What are their biggest motivations and obstacles when considering college-going? This is the first study, to my knowledge, that addresses the rural/non-rural differences in college expectations of Vietnamese students.
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Most studies on educational expectations, particularly college expectations, have relied on two theoretical models: status attainment and social support. Since these frameworks have emerged from and contributed to the existing scholarship, in the following sections, I will introduce each framework alongside corresponding studies that explain, apply, and illuminate the framework. Next, connecting to the literature on rural education, I will explain the complexities of college expectations when being placed within the rural/non-rural disparity discourse.

Status Attainment Framework

Emerging from social mobility research in the 1960s, the social attainment, first introduced by Blau and Duncan (1967) and further developed by Sewell and colleagues (1969, 1970), has been the dominant theoretical model in explaining students’ educational expectations and aspirations (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010; Colclough & Horan, 1983; Kao & Tienda, 1998). The status attainment framework suggests that socioeconomic status (SES) is a powerful predictor of students’ educational expectations, especially at the postsecondary educational level. Supporting this framework, many previous studies indicate that students with higher SES backgrounds are more likely to expect to go to college than those with lower SES backgrounds (e.g., James, 2001; Kutty, 2014; McDonough, 1997; Schmitt-Wilson, 2012; although see Wei et al., 2019). In most studies, students’ SES backgrounds are measured by parental education, parental occupational prestige, and family income (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Plank & Jordan, 2001).
Regarding parental education, research has conclusively indicated that students with college-educated parents are more likely to desire to attend college and maintain high motivations throughout the application process (Addington, 2005; Anderson, 1980; Hossler et al., 1999). This is a result of a nurturing home environment where education is highly valued and supported (Lamont, Lareau, Theory, & Autumn, 2007) and where college attendance is regularly discussed as a cultural or familial norm shaping children’s college plans at young ages (Addington, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999). Similarly, parents with higher occupational prestige are more likely to provide their children with essential resources for education and college preparation. They may also serve as role models for their children in terms of educational success and return, which could inspire their children to reach higher education levels. As children often want to attain positions comparable to those of the adults in their families (Kao & Tienda, 1998), parental occupational prestige has an important impact on children’s educational expectations and aspirations beyond high school. Family income is also important in shaping students’ college expectations because the processes of preparing for, applying to, and attending college are often associated with costs. Studies have shown that when controlling for academic ability, the chances of a student enrolling in a college increase with the student’s family income (Klasik, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2001).

Social Support Framework

Grounded in the social support literature, the social support framework emphasizes the role of social support that students receive from parents, peers, and teachers (or school counselors, coaches) in making postsecondary educational plans. Parents with high expectations for their children’s educational attainment tend to have frequent discussions about college plans
with their children and encourage them to enter colleges (Byun et al., 2012; Kutty, 2014). The important role of parental educational expectation partially explains why students of immigrant, low-income, and low-occupational-prestige parents still have high educational expectations and aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kim, Sherraden, & Clancy, 2013). In addition to parents, peers and teachers also play an integral role in shaping student’s college expectations. These people often provide information and knowledge about college admissions and choosing colleges (“college talk”), which help students feel familiar with college requirements and make college entrance more attainable (Kutty, 2014; McDonough, 1997). Particularly, using the U.S. Educational Longitudinal Study data, Bryan and colleagues (2017) found that college talk with school educators in 12th grade (senior year) significantly increased students’ odds of going to college. College talk in school was also considered a mediator between college expectations and postsecondary enrollment (Bryan et al., 2017).

**Complexities of Rural/Non-Rural Disparity in College Expectations**

When applying the status attainment and social support frameworks to the context of rural education, scholars have argued that these frameworks cannot entirely explain the rural/non-rural disparities in college-going decisions (e.g., James, 2001; Shucksmith, 2012). This is because the rural/non-rural comparison is conceptually, methodologically, and contextually complex and nuanced. Conceptually, research on rural education has developed two conflicting yet complementary narratives: the rural advantage narrative and the rural disadvantage narrative (Li, 2019). The rural advantage narrative highlights the benefits of close-knit relationships in rural families, schools, and communities to students’ educational attainment (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). Meanwhile, the rural
disadvantage narrative underscores the lower SES, lower parental educational expectations, and fewer local opportunities in rural areas compared to non-rural areas as factors that limit rural students’ educational attainment (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Hektner, 1995). Methodologically, since there is no consistent definition of rurality, studies have used different categorizations (e.g., rural versus urban, rural versus urban and suburban, rural versus urban, suburban, and town) in their comparative analyses of rural/non-rural college expectations, which can lead to inconsistent results. For example, using data from the U.S. High School Longitudinal Study, Li (2019) found that when treating town as rural/non-metro, non-rural/metro students had a significantly higher college expectation than their rural/non-metro peers. However, when treating town as suburban, the differences in college expectations between rural-urban and rural-suburban students were no longer significant (Li, 2019). Contextually, because the concepts of rurality and urbanity can be highly circumstantial and quickly shift due to the urbanization process, findings from studies conducted in different contexts or times can vary greatly (e.g., Sanchez & Singh, 2018; Li, 2019; Wei et al., 2019).

Furthermore, numerous scholars have argued that low educational expectations among rural students cannot entirely be explained by rural deficits (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Howley, 2006). For example, Howley (2006) argued that many rural youth limit their educational expectations and aspirations not because they suffer from rural disadvantages but because they have greater attachment to rural life. Given that rural youth often have strong ties with their families and communities, their desires to stay near home or other rural regions may be higher than the desires to attend college in metropolitan areas or earn as much money as possible in future careers (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 2009; McLaughlin, Shoff, & Demi, 2014). In the process of making decisions for postsecondary education, rural students need to take into account
many other sociocultural aspects including the closeness of the university to their home families, the labor market of their community areas, and the chances of returning to work after graduation (Hektner, 1995). Most of these elements are not the concerns of urban students when making college plans. The unique features of rurality add more layers and nuances to the complexity of rural-urban disparities in college expectations.

**Methodology**

Because the research questions target both the general patterns of students’ college expectations and the specific motivations and subjective experiences that shape these expectations, this study applied a mixed-methods approach, in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, analyzed, and integrated (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The research procedure followed the convergent parallel design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously. The primary purpose of this approach was to “obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” that broaden the understanding of the research problem (Morse, 1991. p. 122). The following paragraphs will explain in detail the study’s setting and procedure, in which both types of data were collected, analyzed, and integrated.

**Setting and Data Collection**

**Setting.** This article is based on a larger mixed-methods study on the post-secondary educational expectations and aspirations of students in Hanoi. Although historically known as an urban metropolitan hub of Vietnam, over the last decades, Hanoi has gone through several
adjustments, which have expanded the Hanoi’s administrative boundary to include both urban and non-urban districts. (See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for more context). This unique characteristic of Hanoi provides the opportunity to compare students’ college expectations across rural and non-rural areas—a central objective of this study.

Acknowledging the complexity of defining rurality and urbanity, this study relies on the regional categorization by Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to define rural, suburban, and urban areas. The MOET divides Hanoi into three regional groups according to their distance from and relation to Hanoi’s inner city, as well as their levels of access to education. “Region 1” represents remote, mountainous, rural districts and communities, which are often the furthest from the inner city and have the lowest access to education. “Region 2” includes non-urban districts and districts that are in the outskirt (suburb) of Hanoi, which have some disadvantages in terms of educational access. “Region 3” is made up of all urban districts located in the inner city of Hanoi, which often have the highest access to education (MOET, 2016b). This categorization is a combination of geographic locations and educational advantage/disadvantage levels. It is also the foundation for the affirmative action policy pertaining to college entrance, in which exam takers residing in Region 1 and Region 2 receive extra points on their college entrance examination. The main reason for choosing this categorization is that in addition to geographic distance, it takes equity into account in access to higher education when defining rural, suburban, and urban, which aligns with the topic of this study. In addition, this categorization is also consistent with the common public understanding of geographic locations within Hanoi, which was reflected in my interviews with study participants (Nguyen, 2017).
In order to choose the school sites, I began by using a stratified sampling technique to identify 10 districts whose locations spanned all three MOET’s regions. Within these 10 districts, using a list of high schools provided by the MOET’s Central Office in Hanoi, I shuffled the schools’ identification numbers and randomly selected 12 schools, among them, 3 schools were located in rural areas, 4 schools were located in suburban areas, and 5 schools were located in urban areas. Upon receiving the permissions and consents from all schools, I visited each school site between the end of 2016 and early 2017. Following the convergent parallel design, I simultaneously collected quantitative and qualitative data.

**Quantitative data collection.** Quantitative data was obtained through a paper-based survey of senior-year high school students. The survey asked students to report their postsecondary educational expectations and aspirations, family backgrounds, and factors that contributed to their educational plans. Surveys were distributed to all seniors attending the school at the time of my visit. Among 4,550 surveys distributed, 4,182 surveys were collected (91.9% response rate). After taking out unqualified surveys (e.g., surveys that were illegible or missing over 80% of the answers), the number of qualified surveys was 4,032 (96.4% of total surveys collected). For this particular study, because the focus was on students’ college expectations, I only included those students reporting that they planned to take the NHSE, which would make them eligible for high school graduation and college application and prompt them to continue answering the survey questions related to postsecondary educational plans. This yielded a total N of 3,979.

**Qualitative data collection.** In order to have a deeper understanding of students’ subjective experiences and specific factors that shaped their educational plans, I conducted interviews with 40 students (14 rural, 10 suburban, and 16 urban students), 11 school leaders
(principals or vice principals), and 25 teachers. To recruit student interviewees, I distributed an interview sign-up sheet alongside the survey, asking any survey takers interested in participating in the interview phase to write down their names and contact information. Based on this sheet, I randomly selected student interviewees. In a few cases, when school leaders and/or teachers suggested that I should talk with specific students (e.g., those going through extreme family hardship, expressing very high or very low expectations), I also interviewed them. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and in either individual or group interview format, depending on participants’ preferences. During the interviews, students were asked to share their backgrounds, post-secondary educational plans, and rationales behind their educational decisions. For school leaders and teachers, I recruited them both by email or phone prior to my visits and in-person during my visits. I aimed to interview either school principal or vice-principal, whoever was available at the time of my visit and teachers who have wide experience with senior cohorts. During interviews with school leaders and teachers, I asked participants to share their professional experiences, thoughts on students’ educational plans, and what they have done to help their students prepare for high school graduation and college.

Measures and Analytical Strategies

Survey measures.

Dependent variable. The measure of dependent variable—the student’s college expectation—was based on the question “Do you plan to apply to a college in your senior year?”
The original responses were “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t know.” In this analysis, this variable was coded 1=Yes and 0=No and Don’t know. This was a binary variable.

**Independent variable.** To examine the differences in students’ college expectations across geographic locations, I used location as an independent variable. Mapping on the MOET’s regional categorization mentioned above, this variable was coded 1=Rural, 2=Suburban, and 3=Urban. It was treated as a categorical variable.

**Control variables.** Because students’ college expectations are likely to be influenced by their background characteristics, I included gender and GPA as control variables. Gender was a dichotomous variable, which was coded 1=female and 0=male. GPA was measured by an open-ended question asking students to report their GPAs of the most recent semester. It was treated as a continuous variable.

**Explanatory variables.** Drawing on the social attainment and social support frameworks, three sets of explanatory variables were included in the analysis: (1) socioeconomic status (SES), (2) parental expectation of child’s education and (3) frequency of discussion about student’s educational plan between the student and his/her parents, peers, and teachers.

The SES variable was an index created by several related categorical variables suggested by prominent literature: family income (categorically ranging from 1=less than 5 million VND to 7=more than 80 million VND), father/mother’s highest educational level (categorically ranging from 1=less than high school graduation to 7=Completed a Ph.D., M.D., J.D., or other advanced professional degree), and father/mother’s occupational prestige (categorically ranging from

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4 Since the percentages of students responding “No” (5.88%) and “Don’t know” (4.35%) were relatively low and the focus of this study was on students’ expectation of going to college (“Yes”), I combined “No” and “Don’t know” responses. During the data exploration process, I conducted a series of multinomial and logistic regression with the dependent variable including all three separate “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t know” responses and including only “Yes” and “No” (dropping “Don’t know”). These analyses showed almost very few differences in the overall findings. Therefore, combining “No” and “Don’t know” would not affect the study’s results.
I created the index using the factor command in Stata analytical software version 16.0.

The second set of variables concerned father’s and mother’s expectations for the student’s educational attainment with original survey responses categorically ranging from less than high school to complete Ph.D., M.D., J.D., or other advanced professional degree. Because the study focuses on students’ college-going decisions, these variables were recoded into three categories: 1=graduated from a vocational school or less, 2=graduated from a two-year or four-year college, and 3=completed a master’s degree or higher. The third set of variables targeted how often parents, peers, and teachers discussed the student’s educational plans (based on five-point Likert scales of frequency: 1=almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=sometimes, 4=frequently, 5=almost always). (See Table 4 for descriptive statistics of all variables)

Survey analysis. Survey data were analyzed using multiple statistical tests. First, I completed descriptive analyses to capture the general trends of students’ college expectations. A chi-square ($\chi^2$) test was performed in this stage. Then, I conducted a series of logistic regression analyses to investigate the relationship between students’ geographic locations and their college expectations. Specifically, mapping on the theoretical frameworks and previous literature, six models were estimated. The first model only considered the relationship between location and college expectation, specifically if the student resides in a rural area, how likely s/he would plan to apply to college (Model 1). The second model considered the relationship between location and college expectation, when controlling for the student’s background characteristics, including gender and GPA (Model 2). The third model examined the location-college expectation...

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5 The survey questions about parental occupations were open-ended. After entering all original answers by survey participants, I coded and categorically ranked them using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) by the International Labour Office (ILO, 2012) and an adapted ISCO-08 by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO, 2017).
relationship with SES as an explanatory variable (Model 3). The fourth and fifth models considered the same relationship when individually including social support explanatory variables: parental expectation of child’s education (Model 4) and frequency of discussion about student’s educational plan among parents, peers, and teachers (Model 5). The final model (Model 6) combined all variables included in this analysis. The aim of this approach was to determine whether the relationship between geographic location and college expectation, if any, held even after controlling for other factors and to identify factors aside from geographic location account for the differences in students’ college expectations.

To address missing data, I employed a multiple imputation technique with the `ice` command in the Stata software package to generate five data sets with five sets of imputed values. Sequentially, I used the `mim` command in Stata to compute Rubin’s (1987) measures for multiple imputation regression analysis. To address the nested nature of the data (i.e. students within schools), I used the `vce(cluster clustvar)` option in Stata that adjusts the standard errors for intragroup correlation, relaxing the requirement of independent observations (Stata, 2018).

To further investigate the motivations behind students’ high and low expectations for college going beyond the regression models above, I also drew on the descriptive statistics of students’ responses to two questions: (1) “Which of the following reasons made you want to apply to college/university?” and (2) “Which of the following reasons made you don’t want to or don’t know whether to apply to college/university?” Both these questions provided multiple choices for students to select all that apply.

**Interview analysis.** Interview data were transcribed by a professional transcriber and then I translated the transcriptions into English. The data were coded inductively and deductively in two sequential rounds. In the first round, I performed open coding, reading for major themes
that emerged from the transcripts and recording participants’ repetitive words and phrases. In the second round, mapping on the research questions, I created new codes and re-organized existing codes that including data related to students’ college expectations, rationales and motivations regarding college-going, and factors shaping their college expectations. In this round, I also noted major differences and similarities in participants’ answers to the same interview questions across locations.

Sequentially, coded interview data were analyzed using a thematic analytical approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Because the interview participants were from different socioeconomic and residential backgrounds and in different occupational positions (i.e. students, teachers, school leaders), this thematic approach allowed me to see patterns across different datasets. This approach is also very helpful to analyze and interpret mixed-methods results — as Boyatzis (1998) mentioned: “Often, researchers using quantitative and qualitative methodologies battle on the level of philosophical abstractions merely because they are having difficulty communicating with each other. […] Thematic analysis offers a vehicle for increasing communication in ways that researchers using various methods can appreciate” (p. 5). By focusing on major themes emerging from mixed-methods data, this approach allowed a smooth integration between quantitative and qualitative findings.

Thus, after completing quantitative and qualitative analyses separately, I merged the results from both approaches and continued using the thematic analytical approach to compare major themes across two sets of data. In this integrative stage, I noted if and how the qualitative results explained or contrasted the quantitative results and considered how the two methods “communicate” with one another to create meaningful research findings.
Limitations

Two limitations of this study are generalizability and scope. First, by focusing on only Hanoi, the study cannot possibly make generalizations to all rural and non-rural students of the country. The college expectations of students may differ in other metropolitan areas in the Middle and the South of Vietnam (e.g., Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City), where the number of colleges and universities are significantly lower than Hanoi. In these areas, students’ college expectations may be limited due to the availability of institutions. In addition, although the definition of rurality with three-category comparisons (rural, urban, and suburban) used in this study is appropriate for the context of Hanoi, it might not be the same across Vietnam. This issue might limit the applicability of the study’s findings to other areas with different rural/non-rural dynamics. Future research using national or nationally representative data with a consistent definition of rurality would help increase generalizability.

Second, since the study draws data from a self-reported survey distributed a semester before the NHSE, it was unable to track whether participants actually took the exam and applied to colleges. In other words, the scope of this study did not allow a longitudinal analysis of students’ college expectations and how they might have changed over the course of the year leading to the NHSE. Given that the Vietnamese college admission policy has been frequently reformed, it is possible that a change announced after the time of data collection could change students’ college decisions. Future studies with follow-up surveys and interviews across times and periods would help fill this gap.
Table 4. Description of variables and summary statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All (N=3,979)</th>
<th>Rural (N=655)</th>
<th>Suburban (N=1,664)</th>
<th>Urban (N=1,660)</th>
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<td>Mean or Proportion (%)</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean or Proportion (%)</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
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<td>College expectation/Going to college</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>89.77</td>
<td>67.48</td>
<td>92.61</td>
<td>95.72</td>
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<td>60.84</td>
<td>59.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father's Expectation of Child's Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from a vocational school or less</td>
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<td>33.21</td>
<td>6.20</td>
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<td>Graduate from a two-year or four-year college</td>
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<td>54.82</td>
<td>74.93</td>
<td>57.63</td>
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<td>Complete a master’s degree or higher</td>
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<td>11.96</td>
<td>18.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother's Expectation of Child's Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from a vocational school or less</td>
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<td>32.16</td>
<td>6.75</td>
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<td>57.29</td>
<td>73.16</td>
<td>57.10</td>
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<td>25.82</td>
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<td>20.10</td>
<td>38.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of Discussion about Educational Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>4.54</td>
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<td>Sometime</td>
<td>41.32</td>
<td>43.91</td>
<td>45.12</td>
<td>36.38</td>
</tr>
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<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Peers' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan</td>
<td>Teachers' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>7.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>14.15</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometime</td>
<td>Sometime</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37.18</td>
<td>36.34</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
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<td></td>
<td>39.53</td>
<td>32.21</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Almost always</td>
<td>Almost always</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12.35</td>
<td>10.30</td>
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### Table 5. Summary of logistic regression analysis of students' college expectations

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<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
<td>Coef (Robust SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
<td>Odd Ratio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1.798*** (0.428)</td>
<td>1.287*** (0.317)</td>
<td>1.203*** (0.310)</td>
<td>0.799*** (0.219)</td>
<td>1.288*** (0.297)</td>
<td>0.855*** (0.210)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>2.378*** (0.611)</td>
<td>1.213*** (0.381)</td>
<td>0.963** (0.435)</td>
<td>0.735** (0.312)</td>
<td>1.047** (0.420)</td>
<td>0.794*** (0.294)</td>
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<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female (vs. Male)</td>
<td>0.0283 (0.144)</td>
<td>0.0830 (0.141)</td>
<td>1.087 (0.150)</td>
<td>0.0268 (0.143)</td>
<td>1.049 (0.156)</td>
<td>0.00350 (1.004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>1.124*** (0.155)</td>
<td>3.077 (0.161)</td>
<td>1.058*** (0.118)</td>
<td>0.839*** (0.171)</td>
<td>1.079*** (0.132)</td>
<td>0.862*** (2.369)</td>
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<td>Explanatory variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status (SES)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.263** (0.123)</td>
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<td>0.937 (0.129)</td>
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<td>0.179 (0.148)</td>
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<td>1.196 (0.148)</td>
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<td>0.893 (0.148)</td>
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<td>Parental Expectations</td>
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<td>Father's Expectation of Child's Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate from a vocational school or less=base</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.897*** (0.317)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete a two-year or four-year college</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.587*** (0.317)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.888*** (0.327)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.431 (4.888)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete a master’s degree or higher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.587*** (0.317)</td>
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<td>2.431 (4.888)</td>
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</table>
Mother's Expectation of Child's Education

(Graduate from a vocational school or less = base)

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<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Frequency 1</th>
<th>Frequency 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate from a two-year or four-year college</td>
<td>1.808***</td>
<td>6.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete a master's degree or higher</td>
<td>1.593***</td>
<td>4.919</td>
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Parents' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan

(Frequency of Discussion about Educational Plan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency 1</th>
<th>Frequency 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>1.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>1.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometime</td>
<td>0.955***</td>
<td>2.598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>0.715*</td>
<td>2.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>0.715*</td>
<td>2.043</td>
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</table>

Peers' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan

(Almost never = base)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency 1</th>
<th>Frequency 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>1.259</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>1.155</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometime</td>
<td>0.955***</td>
<td>2.598</td>
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<tr>
<td>Always</td>
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### Teachers' Discussion about Student's Educational Plan

(Almost never = base)

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**Observations**: 3,979

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Findings

Students’ College Expectations: General Patterns and Influencing Factors

The quantitative analysis revealed major patterns of college expectations and their influencing factors. In general, the majority of students planned to apply to college; however, the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students was significant. Rural students had significantly lower expectations for college than their suburban and urban peers, even after controlling for other variables, including GPA—a variable that significantly and positively associated with college expectations. In addition to geographic location, SES, parental expectation, and the frequency of discussion between parents and students about educational plans were the most powerful predictors of the student’s college expectation.

Descriptive statistics results. The descriptive statistical analyses (Table 4) showed that the majority of students planned to apply to college in their senior year (89.77%). However, the proportion of students expected to enter college was lower among rural (67.48%) than suburban (92.61%) and urban (95.72%) students. The chi-square test result confirmed that the association between students’ college expectations and their geographic locations was significant ($\chi^2 = 433.0390$, $p < 0.01$).

Regarding background characteristics, with the average GPA of all surveyed population was 7.76 (SD = 0.93), rural students had the lowest GPA ($M = 6.95$, $SD = 0.73$) compared to their suburban ($M = 7.53$, $SD = 0.70$) and urban ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 0.85$) peers. Similar pattern was also found in SES, where rural students had much lower SES than suburban and urban students ($M = -0.75$ vs. $M = -0.35$ vs. $M = 0.74$). Given the composition of the SES index, this result means that students in rural areas were likely to come from families with the lowest
incomes, parental educational levels, and parental occupational prestige, while these categories were the highest in urban students’ families.

The expectations of fathers and mothers towards their children education were largely similar. Most fathers and mothers (64.57% and 64.01%, respectively) expected their children to graduate from a two-year or four-year college. However, when comparing rural and urban parental expectations, the proportional priorities seemed to switch. In particular, approximately 33% of rural parents expected their children to graduate from vocational school or less and only about 11% of them expected their children to complete a master’s degree or higher. Meanwhile, only about 4.5% of urban parents expected their children to graduate from vocational school or less and approximately 38% of them expected their children to complete a master’s degree or higher.

In terms of the frequency of discussion about educational plans, most students indicated that they discussed with their parents, peers, and teachers “sometime” (41.32%, 37.18%, and 36.34%, respectively) and “frequently” (37.79%, 39.53%, and 32.21%, respectively). Regarding the highest frequency of discussion (“almost always”), urban parents (17.35%) discussed with their children about educational plans more often than non-rural parents; however, rural parents (10.31%) discussed more often than suburban parents (8.30%). The same pattern was found in peers’ discussion. Interestingly though, rural teachers (14.82%) were more likely to “almost always” discuss their students’ educational plans compared to suburban (10.42%) and urban (8.37%) teachers.

**Logistic regression results.** Results from logistic regression analysis with six models estimated (Table 5) further explained the gap in college expectations across geographic locations
and its contributing factors. Model 1 demonstrated a significant difference in college expectations between rural and non-rural students. Without any controls, urban students were over 10 times more likely to expect college than rural students (OR = 10.785, p < 0.01). Suburban students were about 6 times more likely to expect college than their rural peers (OR = 6.037, p < 0.01). When accounting for control variables (Model 2), the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students remained significant; however, the odds of students expecting college in urban and suburban areas shifted compared to the previous model. In this model, urban students were about 3.4 times more likely to expect college than rural students (OR = 3.363, p < 0.01). Meanwhile, suburban students were 3.6 times more likely to expect college than their rural peers (OR = 3.621, p < 0.01). Among control variables, no significant differences in college expectation between female and male was evident; however, students with higher GPA were more likely to plan to apply to college (OR = 3.077, p < 0.01).

Model 3 further examined the college expectation-geographic location relationship when SES was taken into account. The result revealed that student families’ SES significantly predicted the likelihood of their college expectations (OR = 1.3, p < 0.05). With the inclusion of SES, significant differences in college expectations between rural and non-rural students persisted. However, the gap between rural and urban students became narrower, compared to the previous model; urban students were about 2.6 times more likely to expect college than their rural peers (OR = 2.621, p < 0.05). The gap between rural and suburban (OR = 3.330, p < 0.01) students remained essentially the same.

In Model 4, when the parental expectation variable was added, SES was no longer significant. Parental expectations significantly predicted the likelihood of college-going plan.
Students whose fathers expected them to graduate from a two-year or four-year college were about 2.5 times more likely to plan to apply to college (OR = 2.452, p < 0.01) than those whose fathers only expected them to graduate from vocational school or less. This rate was even greater in students whose father expected them to complete a master’s degree or higher (OR = 4.88, p < 0.01). Similarly, the odds of students whose mothers expected them to graduate from two-year or four-year college (OR = 6.101, p < 0.01) and to complete a master’s degree or higher (OR = 4.819, p < 0.01) were significantly higher than those whose mothers expected them to graduate from vocational school or less.

Model 5 took out parental expectation variables and added variables targeting the frequency of discussion about educational plan between students and their parents, peers, and teachers. With the inclusion of discussion, SES was not significant. The differences in college expectations between rural and non-rural students remained significant; however, the rural-urban and rural-suburban gap increased compared to the previous model. The odds of urban and suburban students expecting college were 2.8 times (OR = 2.850, p < 0.05) and 3.6 times (OR = 3.624, p < 0.01), respectively higher than that of rural students. The frequency of parental discussion significantly predicted college expectations. Students whose parents “frequently” (OR = 2.598, p < 0.01) and “always” (OR = 2.043, p < 0.1) discussed with them about their educational plans were more likely to plan to apply to college than those whose parents “almost never” did so. There was no significant association found in student-peer and student-teacher discussions and students’ college expectations. In Model 6, when all variables were taken into account, the college expectation-geographic location relationship once again remained significant. Urban (OR = 2.211, p < 0.05) and suburban (OR = 2.352, p < 0.01) students were
about twice more likely to expect college than their rural peers. The effects of parental expectations on college expectations continued to be significant at similar rates compared to Model 4. Meanwhile, parental discussion was only significant at the “frequently” level (OR = 1.584, p < 0.1).

In sum, the quantitative results demonstrated a significant gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural Vietnamese students. Besides geographic location, GPA, SES, parental expectation, and parental discussion were among the most impactful factors that positively and significantly associated with the student’s college-going plan. Aligning with social attainment and social support frameworks and previous studies, these findings suggested social inequalities stratifying student’s college expectations across their places of living. The following section, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative findings, will delve deeper into students’ reasons for going or not going to college and motivational factors that shaped their postsecondary educational decisions.

**Motivations and Obstacles: Why Going or Not Going to College**

**Motivations for college-going.** To capture students’ reasons for going to college, the survey asked college expectant students to answer the following multiple-choice question (select all options that apply): “Which of the following reasons made you want to apply to college/university?” The results showed that students’ biggest motivations for going to college were “To have a good job after graduation” (84.05%), “To gain more knowledge” (69.33%), and “To obtain a college degree” (64.42%). (See Figure 3). This result suggested that going to college meant a great deal for these students, not only in terms of broadening their knowledge
but also and more importantly, securing future employments and higher educational statuses. The emphasis on credentials and employment was also found in interviews with students.  

Figure 3. Students' answers to the survey question: "Which of the following reasons made you want to apply to college/university?"

**Credentialism and employment security.** In the interviews, many students shared that going to college has always been their ultimate goal for the entire K-12 academic career; these students were under tremendous pressure to gain high credentials. They believed that having a college degree would promise them a future with employment certainty. Therefore, such terms as “credentials/degrees” and “employment securities/stable jobs” were repeatedly mentioned together and among the most prominent topics of discussion across all interviews. For example, sharing her reasons for college going, Phuong, a female senior-year student at Le An said,
I want to go to college because first, I want to gain more knowledge and then, I want to have a stable job. I think having a college degree would help me find more jobs and start my career more smoothly.

(Individual Interview, 12/21/2016, in Vietnamese)

Phuong was the eldest sister of two siblings and also the class leader. Having the Hanoi Medical University—one of the most prestigious colleges in the country—as her first choice, Phuong said that she wanted to set an example for her siblings and to take care of her parents in the future. Securing a seat in a medical school, in Phuong’s opinion, was the only legitimate path to start a career in medicine. This mindset was shared by many students participating in this study, who believed that going to college would open the door to a bright future with employment certainty.

Although some students argued that having a college degree does not guarantee employment due to increasing uncertainties and competitions in the job market, they still planned to apply to college. These students explained that they were applying to college because they “could not find any alternative option” or “had nothing else to do” — a common theme across interviews with students in both urban and non-urban settings. Students’ conflicting perspectives and emotions about credentials and employment certainty were most evident in group interviews, where participants argued among each other regarding the purposes and outcomes of college. For instance, the following exchange was between Thi and Ngoc, two female seniors in Bang Thai, an average-ranking, suburban school.

Interviewer: What does going to college mean to you?

Thi: It’s very important! If I fail to get into any college, I will be very sad and disappointed… Also, if I am unable to go to college, I feel that my future will be very dark. So, If I fail this year, I will retake the exam over and over again.

Interviewer: I see. Going to college means a great deal for Thi. How’s about you, Ngoc?
Ngoc: Of course, if I fail to get into a college, I will be very sad. But if I fail, I will take some time off to consider what I’m actually good at because there are many people who don’t have a college degree but are still successful. So, I think going to college is just to have a credential; many people graduate from prestigious colleges but remain unemployed or have to work in fields that are different from their study majors.

Thi: [Shakes her head]

Interviewer: You don’t agree, Thi?

Thi: No. Because I think having a college degree will help you a lot in the future, even if you are unemployed or have to work in different fields. My dad often tells me this story to inspire me to enter college at all costs… He said that in the factory that he currently works at, there is a man who graduated from a college but ended up working as an entry-level factory worker. But then, when managers and supervisors realized this man’s outstanding abilities and acknowledged his credentials, they immediately promoted him to a higher position. This man is no longer a manual factory worker. So, I think even with the possibility of unemployment or low-level employment, having a college degree is still a must.

(Group Interview, 12/29/2016, in Vietnamese)

In this exchange, it was clear that both Thi and Ngoc highly valued college entrance. The failure of getting into a college would likely make them “sad” and “disappointed.” However, while Thi considered a college degree “a must,” Ngoc argued that “going to college is just to have a credential,” which does not guarantee a successful future. Then, using a story told by her father, Thi countered that even though there is a possibility of being unemployed or working in different fields than what they expected, having the college training and credential would still place individuals in a more advanced position. These back and forth conversations about the purposes and outcomes of going to college were repeated in many interviews I had with both students and educators. The pressures of credentialism and employment security have made the Vietnamese students strongly desire college yet remain uncertain about the employment opportunity after graduation.
**Policy change as an advantage.** Interviews with school leaders and teachers revealed another motivation for college-going among seniors, particularly in the year that this study was conducted: policy change. Under the reformed college admissions policy, students are required to take only a single test—the National High School Examination (NHSE)—to be considered for high school graduation and college entrance, rather than taking two separate tests for each purpose in the past. In addition, the new policy allows students to have more college and major choices than it did in the previous year. (See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for more details about this policy). In the interviews, many school leaders and teachers mentioned that by simplifying the examination process and diversifying college options, this new policy encouraged students to apply to college. Furthermore, embracing the advantages of this policy, they strategically guided their students to prioritize college entrance over high school graduation. For instance, Mr. Sinh, the principal of Le An, an average-ranking urban high school said,

> [With the new exam policy,] my opinion is to consult and encourage all students to apply straight to college. I told them: “It’d be better to risk your high school graduation chance to have a higher possibility to enter college, rather than graduating from high school but then going nowhere.” Therefore, I oriented all students to focus on their college scores, not their graduation scores… The new policy also allows each student to have multiple college and major choices. If students can score above the MOET’s cut-off point, their chances to enter college will be widely opened. Getting into colleges nowadays is much easier than years ago.

(Individual Interview, 12/21/2016, in Vietnamese)

Using the new policy as a no-excuse reason to apply to college, Mr. Sinh determined to create a college-going culture, which was well received by Le An teachers and students participating in this study.

The college-going culture was even stronger in high-ranking, urban schools, in which college-going has become an obvious, even indisputable, goal of all students. In these schools,
the students’ concerns were not about whether or not they would enter colleges but rather, what
tiers of colleges they might be able to get into. Addressing this pattern, Ms. Ha, a Physics and
homeroom teacher of Ki Thanh, a high-ranking urban school shared,

According to the new policy, almost 100 percent of our students enter college because if
they couldn’t get into some colleges, they could enter others. Some students got into their
first choices of colleges, while others got into their second choices […] In recent years,
about 85-90 percent of our students got into their first choices of college, the rest entered
their second and third choices.

(Individual Interview, 1/16/2017, in Vietnamese)

Echoing Ms. Ha, most school leaders and teachers in high- to average-ranking schools in urban
districts also claimed that nowadays, with a more open admission policy and the increasing
number of colleges and universities in Hanoi, most, if not all of their students have a chance to
enter college. To these high-performing students who expected to go to college, the stress of
higher education admissions was mostly placed on their abilities to compete for a seat in a
prestigious, four-year public university.

Obstacles to college-going. While the decision of going to college was definite in many
students, it was not quite the same to others. To understand students’ reasons for not going or not
sure about going to college, the survey asked: “Which of the following reasons made you don’t
want to or don’t know whether to apply to college/university?” The overwhelming response of
students who indicated that they did not want to apply was “My scores may not be high enough”
(60.76%), which was followed by “I want to work right after graduating from high school”
(30.89%) and “I want to apply to vocational school” (27.09%). For the “Other reason” option
(7.09%), most respondents cited uncertainties around the economic return of higher education
and employment opportunities as discouraging factors to college application (See Figure 4).
These patterns were also reflected in the interviews, in which students’ anxiety towards the
NHSE and desire to work right after high school were prominent themes among students who did not expect to go to college.

![Reasons for Not/Not Sure about Going to College](chart.png)

**Figure 4.** Students' answers to the survey question: "Which of the following reasons made you don't want to or don't know whether to apply to college/university?"

**Test anxiety.** Aligning with the survey result, my interviews with students who did not expect to enter college showed that the NHSE was their biggest obstacle. Test anxiety was prominent and overwhelming. Many students, especially those residing in rural areas, were so afraid of having low NHSE scores that they did not even want to consider college application. For example, Xuan, a female senior in Xuan Ha, a remote rural school, shared,

> I really want to study business administration and my mom also wants me to. However, I am afraid that I am unable to take the test [well enough]. My mom said: “It’s okay” but I worry that if I fail the test, my parents will be sad and I will be said. I’m worried that I will lose my confidence; I don’t dare to take the test.

(Group Interview, 1/13/2017, in Vietnamese)
For several years, Xuan’s parents have run a local restaurant, where she helped cook and serve food every evening after school. She shared that the cooking job was very hard and she would not consider it a career. Yet, still wanting to help her parents run the restaurant, she thought that having good training in business administration would allow her to contribute to the family’s business in the long run. However, she was extremely anxious about the exam. Xuan’s lack of confidence has also been fueled by the fact that only a handful of her classmates decided to apply to college. With almost everyone around her not considering college, Xuan felt intimidated by the idea of taking the exam, failing, and disappointing herself and her parents. This mindset was common among students who did not expect to enter college. It was clear from the interviews that although the NHSE was reformed to be more open and inclusive, it still places a great deal of stress on students, especially those coming from under-resourced, rural areas.

**Desire to work.** As demonstrated in survey’s responses as well as in interviews, students’ desire to work right after high school or enter vocational or trade schools to learn specialized skills that allow them to work without a college degree were the second and third biggest reasons respectively, after test anxiety, that discouraged students to apply to college. A large group of these students came from low-income, rural families, where working to help their parents financially was often perceived as more important and realistic than going to college. The financial pressure of attending a college that is often far away from home coupled with the uncertainty of job obtainment after college graduation drove these students’ desire to enter the workforce over college attendance. Another group of students with low college expectations came from families with small, blue-collar businesses for which they were expected to work
after high school graduation. Some of the local family businesses mentioned in the interviews included handmade traditional crafts, vermicelli noodles, brickwork, and construction.

The desire to work was evident in many interviews with both students and educators. For instance, Tam and Ha-Anh, two female, rural students from Anh Vinh High School commented,

> There are about ten or more of my classmates who won’t apply to college. They want to get a job and work right away [...] They feel that even if they are accepted to college and graduate with a college degree, there is no guarantee that they will get a job. In addition, some of my classmates’ families have craftsman shops or some sort of family business, which can offer a job for them without a degree requirement; so they don’t feel the need to apply to college.

( Interview in Vietnamese, 1/12/2017)

Similarly, Ms. Lan, a Literature and form teacher in Bang Thai, a rural high school, shared,

> In the previous cohort that I led, those students who only took the NHSE to graduate from high school entered vocational or trade schools to learn specific skills for work. For example, some learned to cook, some learned to fix motorbike, some learned to serve in the restaurant or hotel; in general, it only takes a few months of training for them to work right away. Others entered the nearby industrial center to work in factories. [...] Some of them decided to do so because even if they were accepted to a college, their families wouldn’t afford the college expenses, so they went on to learn some skills and enter the workforce right after high school. For the others, their families might be able to afford college. However, the students felt that their academic abilities were not good enough for them to thrive in college and obtain a job after college; so, they decided not to apply to college.

( Interview in Vietnamese, 12/29/2016)

It is interesting that the argument against employment guarantee after college also appeared in interviews with students who did not expect college. To many of them, the end goal of education is employment and if higher education does not guarantee employment, they saw no point in entering college, especially when applying to college means facing an extremely stressful exam and wrestling with the cost of college attendance. Low-income students did not have many options. Either being forced to work in order to support their families financially or encouraged
to work for their family small businesses, many students placed their needs and desires to work beyond the prospect of going to college.

**Rural Attachment or Responsibility?**

Compared to their urban and suburban peers, rural students generally had more concerns about leaving home when making their college decisions. Previous studies pointed to rural attachment—the desire to live in rural community, culture, and lifestyle—as one of the reasons why rural students do not want to leave their hometowns to enter college. Interestingly, this study revealed that among rural students, those who decided to apply to college tended to have a strong attachment to rural life and desire to return after college. Meanwhile, those who decided not to apply to college were not necessarily attached to rural life but mostly felt responsible to stay and work near home to support their families financially.

The desire to leave and then to return was evident in many interviews with rural students who expected college. For example, Nhi, a female senior in Bao Lam High School, shared,

> After graduating from college, I want to stay in the city for 1 or 2 years to earn a good income. Then, I will return, to come back to my hometown to take care of my parents. I will definitely come back.  

(Grupo Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

Nhi further explained that because her four-year college education in urban Hanoi would cost her parents a large amount of hard-earned money, she planned to work in the city for a few years to gather enough money to pay her parents back. After that, she will return to her hometown permanently to live nearby and take good care of her parents. Echoing Nhi, her schoolmate, Tra also planned a future in the hometown after college,
I want to live and work near home so that I can marry someone that also lives here, so that I can visit my parents often. My parents also want me to return to our hometown to work near family and relatives… I love being near my family.  
(Group Interview, 1/5/2017, in Vietnamese)

In the Vietnamese tradition, especially in rural areas, married women are expected to live in or near their husbands’ hometowns. Aware of this cultural norm, Tra did not only plan to return after college graduation but also expected to marry someone from the same town so that she could always live near her parents. Her last statement— “I love being near my family”— precisely summed up her affection for and attachment to her family and rural hometown. Similar plans and emotions were found in many interviews with rural students, most of whom were greatly loved and supported by their close and extended families. Thus, they were encouraged to leave for higher education and to return afterward.

Students who did not expect to go to college also expressed a similar desire to stay close to their families and hometowns. However, unlike those who expected college, these students’ desire to stay was rooted in their concerns over the families’ hardship and their obligations to help out. This subtle yet crucial nuance drove their decisions to not apply to college. Hoa, a female rural senior in Xuan Ha shared,

My plan is that after having a high school diploma, I will look for jobs. […] I’m not sure what type of job I will have yet. […] But I know I want to find a job near home. My family’s [economic] condition is not very well-off. So, I would like to stay nearby to help my parents.  
(Group Interview, 1/15/2017, in Vietnamese)

In Hoa’s response, it was clear that the harsh condition of her family has become a burden and reason for her to work right after high school graduation rather than entering college. Even though she did not know what type of job she could get with a high school diploma, she knew her option was limited only within the close distance to her parents’ home. Similarly, Thuong,
another female senior at Xuan Ha said,

After getting a high school diploma, I would like to go to a vocational school to learn to cook. My only concern is that if I need to travel far for school, there will be no one helping my parents with household chores. My parents work all day, the house would have no one to take care of it. I’m not afraid of living away, I just worry about my parents.

(Group Interview, 1/15/2017, in Vietnamese)

Thuong later mentioned that although she had a plan to enter a vocational school, her concerns about her parents’ well-being and household work made her decision more difficult. Since Xuan Ha is located in the most isolated, under-resourced area of Hanoi, there is unlikely a vocational or trade school—not to mention colleges— that is close to Thuong’s house. As she indicated, “I’m not afraid of living away, I just worry about my parents.” The constant worry about her parents made her hesitant to leave, even for one or two years for a vocational school. Hoa and Thuong were among many low-income rural students participating in this study, whose burdens of contributing to family’s financial situations and taking care of aging parents constantly pushed them away from college. This seemed not to be a major concern for students in non-rural areas.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In summary, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study depicts a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of college expectations of Vietnamese students in rural, suburban, and urban Hanoi. The quantitative analysis revealed a large proportion of students planning to apply to college. However, the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students was persistently significant, even after taking all other variables into account.
Multiple regression models suggested that besides geographic location, factors like GPA, SES, parental expectation, and the frequency of discussion between parents and students about educational plans were important in shaping students’ college expectations. These results support the status attainment and social support frameworks and related studies on the role of family factors in students’ college expectations (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Demi et al., 2010; Li, 2019). The qualitative analysis further explained that students’ perceived positive connection between a college degree (credential) and future employment security, as well as the advantages they might gain from the recent education policy reform encouraged students to apply to college. Meanwhile, their anxiety over the college entrance examination and desire to work immediately after high school were factors that discouraged students from applying. Particularly for rural students, unlike previous studies which argued that rural students do not want to go to college because they have strong attachments to their families and rural lifestyles, this study showed that students who felt attached to rural life indeed wanted to leave for college and then return. Meanwhile, those who did not plan to go to college were not necessarily attached to rural life but rather felt a responsibility to stay and work to support their families.

Several findings were particularly interesting and noteworthy in the study. First, even with recent reforms to broaden access to higher education and the affirmative action policy to give non-urban students extra points towards their college entrance examination, test anxiety remained the primary reason discouraging students, especially those residing in rural areas, from applying to college. Since college admissions to public universities and colleges in Vietnam still largely depend on the NHSE scores, it makes sense why students’ GPA significantly and positively correlated with their college expectations—the higher GPA students earned, the more
confident they felt to take the NHSE and to envision their future in higher education. The study illustrated that rural students tended to have significantly lower GPA, especially compared to their urban peers. Therefore, unless additional measures aside from NHSE scores (e.g., essays, portfolios, extra-curriculum activities) are taken into account when considering college admissions, the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students will likely persist. Furthermore, since previous studies have shown that students with higher college expectations are likely to put more effort into school and have better grades (e.g., Domina et al., 2011; Khattab, 2015), boosting rural students’ college expectations can help improve their GPA, which in turns, fuels their desires for college.

Second, while no significant relationship was found between teachers’ discussion and students’ college expectations, it is interesting that descriptively, teachers in rural schools discussed with students about educational plans more frequently than teachers in non-rural schools. This pattern was also found in interviews with rural teachers and school leaders, who—as their students’ primary resources for education—were very hands-on in preparing the students for the tests, informing them about policy changes, and guiding them to choose colleges or other alternative educational paths. Meanwhile, non-rural educators might not need to be so hands-on because in their contexts, going to college has become a norm and students have more out-of-school resources to rely on when planning for college (see Chapter 3 of this dissertation for more details). The effort of rural educators, however, did not necessarily translate into higher college expectations due to larger systemic inequities (e.g., in SES, parental expectations) that are embedded in geographic locations. Therefore, in addition to continuing affirmative action policies to broaden college access for rural students and providing rural schools more resources
to prepare their students for college, the government needs to take measures to deal with the root cause of educational inequities in rural areas: economy. Unless the gap in household income, employment opportunity, and educational resources between rural and non-rural areas is narrowed, the school’s effort alone cannot remedy the gap in rural/non-rural students’ college expectations.

Third, it is important to note that while both college expectant and non-expectant students questioned employment security as a guaranteed outcome of college credentials, the former group still planned to enter college because to them, college-going still appears as the best option; meanwhile, the latter group decided against college because they could not afford the uncertainty of employment, especially when considering the stress of taking the NHSE, the cost of college attendance, and the responsibility of supporting families financially. As Kim and colleagues (2013) wrote: “[E]ducational expectations also indicate a psychological disposition toward preferred educational outcomes” (p. 85); the mindset toward college education and its outcomes was found a key psychological factor that separated college expectant and non-expectant students in this study. This finding also suggests clashes between traditional Confucian values toward education and the contemporary concerns about the economic returns of education—a phenomenon that is also observed in other East Asian countries (e.g., Kim, Brown, & Fong, 2016; Lee, 2006; Li, 2003).

Accordingly, critiquing the “college-for-all” ethos, one might argue that not all rural students should be encouraged to apply to college. Given rural students’ lower academic achievement, more financial constraints, and fewer employment opportunities compared to their non-rural peers, the impact of falling short of educational and occupational expectations could be
essentially detrimental for them. However, previous research has consistently pointed to numerous long-term educational and occupational benefits of having high college expectations (e.g., Beal & Crockett, 2010; Domina et al., 2011; Khattab, 2015). Even when taking negative consequences of falling short of these expectations into account, youth’s short-term ambitious expectations for college in the year after high school graduation may still outweigh the costs (Villarreal et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a recent study on Vietnamese youth’s occupational choices, Tran and colleagues (2018) found high level of education the most important factor for securing non-manual jobs, even after controlling for all other factors. Additionally, even considering the high unemployment rate and the decline of economic returns in Vietnam, the authors argued that investing in education would still bring better occupational outcomes (Tran, Tran, Pham, & Vu, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to nurture all Vietnamese students’ college expectations, regardless of their geographic locations and social upbringings.
References


Byun, S.-Y., Meece, J. L., & Irvin, M. J. (2012). Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary


Tieken, M. C. (2016). College talk and the rural economy: Shaping the educational aspirations of


Chapter 5

Conclusion

In its three-article format, this dissertation illustrates a comprehensive picture of Vietnamese students, school leaders, and communities during the reform era. The first article (Chapter 2), *Vietnamese Youth, Schools, and Communities in Transition: A Decade after the Administrative Boundary Extension of Hanoi*, discusses local changes following the 2008 landmark policy that enlarged the administrative boundary of Hanoi—a historically urban, metropolitan hub of Vietnam—to include rural and suburban areas. It reveals that although the policy led to rapid economic and sociocultural changes in rural communities, it delayed the process of rural school improvement and failed to incorporate the symbolic meanings of Hanoi into the perspective of rural community members, who still considered Hanoi “the other” place. This article shows the integral impacts of rural-urban transition on the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities in the urbanizing rural areas—an important topic in the contemporary rural education discourse. It also lays the contextual foundation for the following articles to discuss sociocultural and educational inequities across rural and non-rural schools and communities in Hanoi. The second article (Chapter 3), *Nationally Standardized Policy and Locally Interpreted Implementation: How Vietnamese School Leaders Enact Education Reform*, provides a critical lens into the process through which Vietnamese high school leaders interpreted and implemented policy changes following the reform of the Vietnamese National High School Examination (NHSE). Although the policy was nationally standardized and strictly regulated by the government, school leaders’ individual and situated cognition created variations in their understandings and implementing
approaches of the policy, which led to divergent outcomes for students. The study discusses why the local implementation process can undo the logic of policymaking and more critically, how it perpetuates inequities in access to higher education. These findings resonate with and are applicable to other countries with top-down education systems and nationally standardized policy towards college entrance. Building on the discussion of NHSE reform, the third article (Chapter 4), *Going or Not Going to College? Explaining the College Expectation Gaps Between Rural and Non-Rural Vietnamese High School Students*, addresses the rural/non-rural disparity in college expectations. The study argues that while the NHSE reform helped increase students’ general desire to enter college, the gap in college expectations between rural and non-rural students was still significant, even after controlling for all other factors. This was the result of systemic inequities in socioeconomic backgrounds, social support, educational resources, and employment opportunities embedded in students’ places of living. Drawing on rich quantitative and qualitative data, the study reveals the complexities and nuances of rural/non-rural students’ college-going decisions that are rarely discussed in previous literature, which has been heavily Western-centric.

As a whole, the dissertation highlights three major themes, which provide important implications for education policy and politics. First, it is clear from all three studies, especially the first and the second articles (Chapters 2 and 3), that top-down reforms formulated at the national level have caused many problems at the local level. These reforms—either to create more physical space for development projects or to streamline the college admissions process—were well-intended. However, due to the lack of clarity, engagement, and stability in policy design and representation, the reforms led to confusion, frustration, and stress among students,
teachers, and school leaders, who were directly impacted by these changes. Moreover, when formulating these reforms, policymakers tended to underestimate the diversity of local contexts and the individuality of local authorities in interpreting and implementing the policy. This phenomenon, coined by James Scott (1998) as “state simplification,” led to empty promises from the government and unintended outcomes of the reforms. Scott writes:

All of state simplifications that we have examined have the character of maps. That is, they are designed to summarize precisely those aspects of a complex world that are of immediate interest to the mapmaker and to ignore the rest… In case after case, however, we have remarked on the apparent power of maps to transform as well as merely to summarize the facts that they portray. This transformative power resides not in the map, of course, but rather in the power processes by those who deploy the perspective of that particular map. (Scott, 1998, p. 87)

The transformative power negotiated between those who create “the map” and those who deploy “the map” is evident in this study in the relationship between policymakers and local school leaders. For example, the first article reveals that adding rural schools and districts to the larger administrative unit of the Hanoi Central Office of Education slowed down the process of rural school improvement—an opposite effect of what policymakers intended. Under the pressure to boost rural students’ academic achievement to be comparable with those of urban students in a short period, some school leaders admittedly had to choose “shortcuts,” which meant to compromise with lower evaluation standards and violations of academic integrity. These mismatches between policy intents and policy outcomes are common in top-down reforms, in which state simplification is the norm.

However, while it may be tempting to suggest a more bottom-up approach to education reforms, it is almost impossible to do so in the current socialist political structure of Vietnam. In addition, as illustrated in this study, the top-down approach also offered several important
benefits, including the ability to create rapid, large-scale changes and the power to control and manipulate certain aspects of policy outcomes. As Scott (1998) also notes, the “tunnel vision” of state simplification is sometimes advantageous because “it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality,” which makes policymaking “more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation” (p. 11).

Therefore, it is more effective and realistic to work within the constraints of the current top-down policy context rather than to overturn the entire system. For example, while it is important that the government continues its effort to foster rural development and access to higher education nationwide, every policy change needs to be clearly communicated with local implementing agents. If a change is a part of a larger policy agenda, this agenda needs to be strategically announced and widely discussed among policy implementing agents to avoid confusion and speculation. This approach may lower certain degrees of the state’s power in controlling and manipulating the policy messages, but it will allow stronger state-local authorities’ collaboration, which in turn, reduces variations and unintended policy outcomes. Moreover, the government should establish a stable and predictable timeline for reform cycles (i.e., when the new policy is announced, assessed, and adjusted for the next cycle) to eliminate the anxiety and frustration among educational stakeholders while anticipating a new policy change. Because different places and populations have their unique problems that cannot be addressed by a single standardized policy, in the designing process, policymakers need to create space for local adjustment and creativity within a limited range that does not threaten the overall standardization.

Second, collectively, the three articles point to a root cause of rural/non-rural disparities in education: economy. Unless the government proactively and aggressively tackles poverty in
rural areas, simply changing the name of a rural place to “Hanoi” or giving rural students additional points towards their NHSE will not drastically help rural development and educational attainment. Although equalizing socioeconomic differences between rural and non-rural areas is a difficult task for almost every country, Vietnam can utilize its top-down political system as an advantage to regulate the economy. Particularly, with the power of a socialist state, the Vietnamese government can direct more domestic and international investments to rural areas (e.g., by building industrial zones and offering incentives for companies to open their manufacturing facilities in underdeveloped regions), which will generate more employment opportunities. In addition, since most major colleges and universities in Vietnam are public, the government can request these institutions to open branch campuses in non-urban areas, which will not only boost the college enrollment rate among rural students but also decrease the urban density by lowering the number of students migrating to the inner city for college attendance. This approach will also create a more educated labor force directly contributing to the development of the local economy. In the meantime, to deal with the immediate issue of rural outmigration, the government can issue a policy that provides incentives (e.g., college scholarship, guaranteed employment) for educated youth to return to their rural hometowns after college graduation. These policies, if executed successfully, will bring short-term and long-term benefits to rural economy and education.

Third, as evident in both quantitative and qualitative data from the three studies, teachers and school leaders in lower ranking and rural schools had to work harder to support their students while facing more difficulties in adjusting to a new policy than those in higher ranking and non-rural schools. Nonetheless, there seemed to be very little compensation and
accommodation for their work. Therefore, it is essential for Vietnamese policymakers to acknowledge this gap and provide additional supports for educators serving in these schools. For example, struggling schools should be given more time and financial resources to implement a new policy. If after-school activities, such as tutoring hours, teacher-parent conferences, and college and career counseling sessions, are necessary to help underachieving, rural students keep up with their counterparts, they should be well funded so that teachers and school leaders are more motivated and committed to working these additional hours. Instead of critiquing educators who serve struggling schools for not being able to raise their students’ academic achievement—as indicated in several hurtful stories shared by participants of this study—the Central Office needs to understand their local constrains, set more realistic expectations for these schools, and provide accommodations to support these educators’ challenging work.

This dissertation is only the beginning of a new line of scholarship on Vietnamese youth’s college expectations, aspirations, and access that I plan to pursue in the next five years. Given the rich data collected for this dissertation project—namely, over 4,000 student survey responses on various questions ranging from socioeconomic backgrounds to educational and occupational aspirations, interviews with 76 students, teachers, and school leaders about their educational and professional experiences—there are many potentials for future research. For instance, I have been working on several manuscripts using these data to examine the college choices and career plans among male and female students. As my academic career progresses and so does the education reform in Vietnam, there will surely be more studies published from this project to draw scholarly attention to issues of justice and equity in a top-down, centrally controlled system—an important yet under-researched topic in education.
References

Appendix A

Student Survey

(This is the English translated version. The original survey was in Vietnamese)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey! Your participation is very important.

This study is interested in understanding: (1) your educational plan in the senior year and (2) your future plan beyond high school. The survey will also ask about your background in order to provide context about your life.

The survey should take no more than ten minutes. There are no right or wrong answers. Your participation is voluntary and all information will be kept confidential.

All answers will help us better understand the future aspirations of Vietnamese high school students. As such, your honest and accurate answers will be very helpful for our study. So, please answer them to the best of your ability.

Thank you again for your time!

------------------------

Section 1: About You

1. Are you male or female? (mark ONE response)
   - Male
   - Female

2. What is your most recent semester GPA?
   Answer: _____________________________

Section 2. Your Plan in Senior Year

1. Do you plan to take the National High School Graduation Exam in your senior year?
2. Do you plan to apply to a college/university in senior year?
   □ Yes
   □ No
   □ Don’t know
   Answer Questions 3,4,5,6

3. What type of college/university are you planning to apply to?
   □ Four-year university
   □ Two-year college

4. What is the name of your top choice of college/university?
   Answer: ________________________________

5. What is the name of your top choice of college/university major?
   Answer: ________________________________

6. Which of the following reasons made you WANT to apply to college/university?
   (mark ALL that apply)
   □ To gain more knowledge
   □ To have more friends
   □ To change my living environment
   □ To obtain a college degree
   □ To have a good job after graduation
   □ My parents want me to apply
   □ Everyone I know is planning to apply
   □ My teachers encourage me to apply
   □ Other reason (Detail: ________________________________)

7. If you DON’T WANT to or DON’T KNOW whether to take the National High School Graduation Exam, what is your plan? (mark ALL that apply)
   □ Quitting high school
   □ Quitting high school but may take the exam next year
   □ Working
   □ Entering the military service
   □ Applying to a vocational school
   □ Going abroad to study
   □ Other (Detail: ________________________________)

8. Which of the following reasons made you DON’T WANT to or DON’T KNOW whether to apply to college/university? (mark ALL that apply)
☐ My scores may not be high enough
☐ I can’t afford college/university tuition and cost
☐ I want to apply to vocational school(s)
☐ I want to work right after graduating from high school
☐ I don’t feel having a college degree necessary for my future
☐ My parents do not encourage me to apply
☐ My teachers do not encourage me to apply
☐ Not many people I know attend college/university
☐ I don’t like to study further
☐ Other reason (Detail: _____________________________)

9. If you DON’T WANT to or DON’T KNOW whether to apply to college/university, what is your plan? (mark ALL that apply)
☐ Applying next year
☐ Working
☐ Entering the military service
☐ Applying to vocational school(s)
☐ Other (Detail: _____________________________)

Section 3. Your Future Plan Beyond High School

1. How far in school would you like to go? (mark ONE response)
☐ Less than high school graduation
☐ High school graduation only
☐ Vocational school
☐ Two-year college
☐ Four-year university
☐ Master’s
☐ Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced professional degree
☐ Other (Detail: _____________________________)

2. Thinking about the future, do you think you will have the same/similar job as your parents’?
☐ Yes
   If YES, that job is: _____________________________
☐ No
   If NO, the job you want to have is: _____________________________
☐ Don’t know

3. Where do you find the MOST HELPFUL information/advice for your future plan? (mark all that apply)
☐ Teachers at school
☐ Teachers outside of school (e.g. in tutoring centers)
☐ School principal
☐ Other school staff
☐ Parents
☐ Friends
Section 4. Your Family

1. How many siblings do you have?
   Answer (in number): ________________________________

2. How much is your family’s monthly income? (Approximate)
   □ Less than 5 million VND
   □ 5-10 million VND
   □ 10-18 million VND
   □ 18-32 million VND
   □ 32-52 million VND
   □ 52-80 million VND
   □ More than 80 million VND

3. What is the highest educational level of your Father/Male Guardian?
   □ Less than high school graduation
   □ High school graduation
   □ Graduate from vocational school or equivalent
   □ Graduate from two-year college
   □ Graduate from four-year college or university
   □ Completed a master’s degree
   □ Completed a Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced professional degree
   □ Other (Detail: ________________________________)
   □ Don’t know

4. What is the highest educational level of your Mother/Female Guardian?
   □ Less than high school graduation
   □ High school graduation
   □ Graduate from vocational school or equivalent
   □ Graduate from two-year college
   □ Graduate from four-year college or university
   □ Completed a master’s degree
   □ Completed a Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced professional degree
   □ Other (Detail: ________________________________)
   □ Don’t know

5. What does your Father/Male Guardian do for a living?
   Answer: ________________________________
6. What does your Mother/Female Guardian do for a living?
Answer: ______________________

7. What is the highest educational level that your Father/Male Guardian expects you to have?
- Less than high school graduation
- High school graduation
- Graduate from vocational school or equivalent
- Graduate from two-year college
- Graduate from four-year college or university
- Completed a master’s degree
- Completed a Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced professional degree
- Other (Detail: __________________________)
- Don’t know

8. What is the highest educational level that your Mother/Female Guardian expects you to have?
- Less than high school graduation
- High school graduation
- Graduate from vocational school or equivalent
- Graduate from two-year college
- Graduate from four-year college or university
- Completed a master’s degree
- Completed a Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or other advanced professional degree
- Other (Detail: __________________________)
- Don’t know

Section 5. Influential Sources

1. In the following questions, please check the box that best describes how often these people discuss with you about your educational plans

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<th>Sometime</th>
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2. In the following questions, please check the box that best describes how much these people influence your educational plan

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<th>Almost none</th>
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<td>How much your parents/guardian opinions influenced your educational plans?</td>
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3. How often have you participated in any of the college preparatory programs/services (e.g., test preparation, college orientation, counseling) at school?

- Almost never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

4. How do you think about the college preparatory programs/services (e.g., test preparation, college orientation, counseling) at school?

- Not helpful
- Fairly helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Very helpful
- Extremely helpful

Note:
You will have an opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview in the next 2 weeks. Would like to participate in this interview?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your participation!
Appendix B

Interview Protocols

(This is the English translated version. Original interviews were in Vietnamese)

Student Interview Protocol

Introduction
Hi! Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my study. I would like to learn about your schooling experiences and plans after high school. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes. Please remember that all information you are about to share with me today will be kept confidential.

Questions
Background
1. Let’s begin by learning a little about you. Can you start out by introducing yourself?
2. Can you tell me about your family? (probe for parental education, parental occupation, and siblings)
3. Where do you live? (probe for the distance from the student’s home to his school, community characteristics)
4. Can you describe your community/place of living? (probe for rural/non-rural categorization, changes after the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension)
5. How have the senior year been for you?

Educational Plan
6. Are you planning to take the national high school graduation exam in your senior year?

IF NO,
   a) Could you tell me why you don’t plan to take the graduation exam?
   b) How did you make that decision?
   c) Who helped you make that decision?
   d) What’s your plan after the senior year of high school?

IF YES,
   a) Could you tell me about the exam?
   b) Could you tell me why you plan to take the graduation exam?
   c) What do the graduation exam mean to you?
d) How have you been preparing for the exam? *(probe for how long the student has prepared for the exam, any tutoring services (s)he has used, any coursework (s)he took)*

e) Who have been helping you prepare for the test?

f) Have you made the decision of subject tests yet?
   
   i. If Yes, What subject tests are you going to take? Why? Who helped you make the decision?
   
   ii. If No, Is it a difficult decision for you? Why?

7. Are you planning to apply to colleges/universities after your senior year?

IF NO,

   a) Could you tell me why you don’t plan to apply to colleges/universities?
   
   b) How did you make that decision?
   
   c) Who helped you make that decision?
   
   d) What’s your plan after high school if you don’t apply to college/university?

IF YES,

   a) Could you tell me about the process of admission this year?
   
   b) Why do you want to apply to college/university this year?
   
   c) What does being admitted to a college/university mean to you?
   
   d) What type of college/university are you planning to apply to?
   
   e) What major are you planning to enroll in?
   
   f) How and Why have you made those decisions?
   
   g) Who have been helping you through the process?
   
   h) How have you been preparing for the exam? *(probe for how long the student has prepared for application, any college preparatory program (s)he has attended at school)*
   
   i) What are your expectations of entering a college/university?

11. How far in school you would like to go?

12. What do you expect you will become in the future, like when you’re 30 years old? *(probe for career plan, family plan, and personal growth)*

13. How is that expectation related to your decision of not getting/getting in college this year?

Closing

Do you want to share anything else regarding your educational or future plan?

Thank you for participating in this study. Good luck with your senior year!
Teacher Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hi! Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my study. I believe that your experience and expertise will bring great insights into my study. I am interested in learning about your working experiences and perspectives of senior-year students’ educational plan after high school. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Please remember that all information you are about to share with me today will be kept confidential.

Question

Professional Background

8. Let’s begin by learning a little about you. Can you start out by introducing yourself?
9. How long have you been teaching in this school?
10. What subject(s) have you been teaching here?
11. Are you also a form teacher?
   ▪ If NO, How many classes have you been teaching this semester?
   ▪ If YES, How many students are there in your class?
12. Do you also live in this community?
   ▪ If NO, Where do you live? (probe for the distance from the teacher’s home to school, community characteristics)
   ▪ If YES, How long have you lived in this community? How do you feel about it? (probe for community characteristics)
   ▪ (As the interviewee is describing his/her community, probe for rural/non-rural categorization, changes after the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension)
13. Why did you decide to be a teacher?
14. How and Why did you decide to teach in this school?

Perspective of Students

15. Thinking about senior-year students, what do they often do in their last year of school? (probe for graduation, college preparatory activities, orientation)
16. What is the percentage of students taking the national high school graduation/university entrance exam each year?
17. What is about your students? How many of them are going to take the national high school graduation exam this year?
   a) For those students who are not going to take the exam, do you know why? (probe for specific examples and stories)
   b) For those students who are going to take the exam, do you know why? How does the exam mean for them? (probe for specific examples and stories)
18. Among those that are going to take the exam, do you know how many of them are going to apply to college this year?
   a) For those students who are not going to take the exam, do you know why? (probe for specific examples and stories)
   b) For those students who are going to take the exam, do you know why? How does the exam mean for them? (probe for specific examples and stories)
19. What do you think about the importance of being admitted to a college or university for your students? (probe for labor market in the community, whether it is necessary or unnecessary for the students to have a college degree)
20. What type of college your students are planning to apply to? (probe two-year college, four-year university, names of some commonly chosen colleges)
21. Can you tell me a little bit about the college admission policy this year and how students should prepare for college? (probe for choosing colleges and majors)
22. In your opinion, what are the challenges and opportunities that students have this year in the college application process?
23. Is there any story that you would like to share about students’ educational aspirations?

**Perspectives of Teachers**
24. In your opinion, what is the role of teachers in helping students prepare for college?
25. What have teachers in this school been doing to help students prepare for college?
26. Is there anything you would like to improve in the future to better prepare students for college?

**Perspective of School and School Leaders**
27. What are some college preparation and career orientation opportunities for students available in this school?
28. How important it is for the school to have a high number of graduated students?
29. How important it is for the school to have a high number of students being accepted to colleges or universities?
30. What have school leaders in this school been doing to help students prepare for college?
31. Is there anything you would like your school to improve in the future?

**Closing**

Is there anything else you want to share?

Thank you for participating in this study. Good luck with your work!
School Leader Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hi! Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my study. I believe that your experience and expertise will bring great insights into my study. I am interested in learning about your working experiences and perspectives of senior-year students’ educational plan after high school. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Please remember that all information you are about to share with me today will be kept confidential.

Questions

Professional Background

32. Let’s begin by learning a little about you. Can you start out by introducing yourself?
33. How long have you been working in this school?
34. Do you also live in this community?
   ▪ If NO, Where do you live? (probe for the distance from the teacher’s home to school, community characteristics)
   ▪ If YES, How long have you lived in this community? How do you feel about it? (probe for community characteristics)
   ▪ (As the interviewee is describing his/her community, probe for rural/non-rural categorization, changes after the 2008 Hanoi’s administrative boundary extension)
35. Can you tell me about your main responsibility?
36. Can you walk me through one of your typical working day?
37. Why did you decide to be a school leader?
38. How and Why did you decide to work in this school?

Perspective of Students

39. Thinking about senior-year students, what do they often do in their last year of school? (probe for graduation, college preparatory activities, orientation)
40. What is the percentage of students taking the national high school graduation/university entrance exam each year?
   c) For those students who are not going to take the exam, do you know why? (probe for specific examples and stories)
   d) For those students who are going to take the exam, do you know why? How does the exam mean for them? (probe for specific examples and stories)
41. Among those that are going to take the exam, do you know how many of them are going to apply to college this year?
   c) For those students who are not going to take the exam, do you know why? (probe for specific examples and stories)
   d) For those students who are going to take the exam, do you know why? How does the exam mean for them? (probe for specific examples and stories)
42. What do you think about the importance of being admitted to a college or university for your students? (probe for labor market in the community, whether it is necessary or unnecessary for the students to have a college degree)

43. What type of college your students are planning to apply to? (probe two-year college, four-year university, names of some commonly chosen colleges)

44. Can you tell me a little bit about the college admission policy this year and how students should prepare for college?

45. In your opinion, what are the challenges and opportunities that students have this year in the college application process?

46. Is there any story that you would like to share about students’ educational aspirations?

Perspective of School and School Leaders

47. What are some college preparation and career orientation opportunities for students available in this school?

48. How important it is for the school to have a high number of graduation?

49. How important it is for the school to have a high number of students being accepted to colleges or universities?

50. In your opinion, what is the role of school leaders in preparing students for college?

51. Is there anything you would like your school to improve in the future?

Perspectives of Teachers

52. In your opinion, what is the role of teachers in helping students prepare for college?

53. What have teachers in this school been doing to help students prepare for college?

54. How have you supported teachers to help students prepare for college and career path?

55. Is there anything you would like improve in the future to better prepare students for college?

Closing

Is there anything else you want to share?

Thank you for participating in this study. Good luck with your work!
ACADEMIC VITA

Chi Nguyen

Education:
Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Comparative and International Education, The Pennsylvania State University, 2019
M.S.Ed. in Education, Culture, and Society, University of Pennsylvania, 2014
B.A. in International Studies, Hanoi University, 2011

Professional Experience:
Higher Education Data Analyst, The Pennsylvania State University, 6/2019-present
Graduate Assistant, The Pennsylvania State University, 2014-2018
Research Assistant, University of Pennsylvania, 2014-2015
Program Administrator, Vietnam National University, 2011-2012
Co-founder & Head of Development Department, Vietnam Youth Education Support Center, 2010-2011
English Teacher, English and Cultural Center (Vietnam), 2007-2011
English Teacher, Eden Social Welfare Foundation (Taiwan), Summer 2009

Selected Publications:

Academic Presentations:
22 refereed national and international conference presentations including annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the University Council on Education Administration (UCEA), the Comparative and International Society (CIES).

Professional Service:
Editor, The Beacon, 2015-2017
President, Penn State’s Educational Leadership Student Association, 2017-2018
Vice President, Penn State’s International Education Student Association, 2016-2017
Vice President, Education Policy Studies Student Association, 2016-2017
Proposal Reviewer, AERA, UCEA, and CIES conferences, 2015-present