

Some Aspects of the Educational

Situation in Viet Nam

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Among the basic needs with which the new Republic of Viet Nam is faced are a new educational philosophy and more schools. These two needs must be satisfied concurrently so that the country can be assured of a continuing supply of new leaders in government, business, social, and cultural institutions.

Education for many years before the French protectorate aimed at developing loyal and virtuous men. This concept of education which was patterned after that of the Chinese and influenced by the Confucian and Taoist philosophies was brought to Viet Nam and remained here for nearly ten centuries as a result of periods of Chinese domination. Men were taught primarily literature and moral principles so that they could become men of "lettres", loyal to their king, respectful to their parents, faithful to their friends, and kind to their neighbors.

Education was a means of maintaining the respect for one's family name as long as possible. For this reason, educators received a great deal of respect although they did not occupy any official position in society. As a matter of fact, the educational background of one's family often determined whether or not a student would be allowed to take the necessary examinations for the completion of his studies. Descendants of many generations of mandarins had more opportunity to complete all the examinations than descendants of the common people.

Other factors influencing a student's completing his studies were the expense involved and the existing social norms. Bad social elements might be barred from certain examinations which tested not only candidates technical skills but their moral character as well. Those whose behavior completely deviated from the social norms were given no chance whatsoever. Such was the case of convicts, rebels, actors, etc. This attitude is easily understood considering that the aim of the examinations at that time was to select future "lettres" and mandarins who would govern the country.

As a consequence of this philosophy, manual labor was despised. No place was given to technical education, for this type of education tended "to lower the dignity of man." In terms of professions, intellectuals were placed first in the prestige classification of Vietnamese society at that time. There were four ranked professions: those of intellectual, farmer, artisan, and tradesman, in that order.

Deeply rooted in the minds of the Vietnamese people, this philosophy of education was handed down from generation to generation until the coming of the French nearly a century ago.

The system of education under the colonial period, (latter half of the 19th century to 1949) in contrast, did not improve much either. Politically speaking, the educational system was organized to train bureaucrats and interpreters who could best serve the colonial regime. On the other hand, the traditional philosophy of education, the aim of which was to form virtuous men, was corrupted by a century of domination which gave great value to the diploma as such.

At no time under the French regime were educational facilities developed for the masses. School facilities were limited, for the French administration did not encourage the mass education of the Vietnamese in order to govern them more easily.

As a result, education was enjoyed by only a small minority, mostly in the cities. This elite group usually found themselves alienated from their fellow countrymen, and a cleavage between intellectuals and workers developed.

As under the pre-colonial period, technical education as well as manual labor received little encouragement. The same contempt for them prevailed.

This approach to education presented even more of a problem during the years of hostilities (1945-1954), for numerous young men and women who had never been given a chance to study were exposed to Communist propaganda influenced by Marxist philosophy. However, credit must be given to the Viet Minh for popularizing education at that time. Under their direction, many efforts were made to teach the people to read and write. This gesture was motivated by a more profound goal than that of extending education to the masses, namely that of training

automatons who would become the best propagandists for the Communist regime. In the same context, it must be remembered that intellectuals were not looked upon with favor at that time.

Thus, education, the aim of which is to free man from ignorance and prepare them for a better life, was for many decades an effective weapon to serve the political aims of whoever was in power.

In order to cope with the present needs of the country, a new philosophy of education must be developed. One cannot change the political system of a country without changing the thinking of the people who live under that system. This fact was recognized by President Ngo-Dinh-Diem when he came to power more than two years ago. Unfortunately, at that time, education had to wait for the solution of more urgent matters, such as security, the refugee problem, economic development, and the life.

Furthermore, reorganizing the educational system so that it could satisfy the needs of the people is not a simple task. Even more difficult is the re-definition of its philosophy. In order to succeed, the first thing to be done is to instill in the minds of the people the need for a new concept of education which will replace the old, false concept.

As Viet Nam is a newly established republic, all demands on the part of the people cannot be immediately satisfied. But the philosophy of an educational system is of such vital importance that it should be given more attention than it receives at present.

The new philosophy of education, should not reflect particular political aims, but at the same time should not contradict the idea of democracy. Education must be available to everyone: it should not be set up for any particular group in the society. It should aim at forming free and responsible citizens who may adequately assist in the reconstruction of the country. The social and economic factors particular to Viet Nam should be considered. In other words, the educational program should be based on the needs and aspirations of the country.

Technical education should be emphasized so that the problem of the lack of technicians may be quickly overcome.

Moral as well as the material support by government leaders and businessmen given to local handicraft work.

The second need, that of more schools, arises from two factors: the political situation of the country and the centralization of the educational system.

Because of the nine years of hostilities following the close of World War II, many school buildings were destroyed and others fell into disrepair. Some schools in good condition were taken over by the army and returned to the government in poor condition. In addition, the number of students increased very rapidly in the period following the Geneva Agreements. This was due to the influx of refugees from the North and the growing interest in education on the part of the Vietnamese people.

The centralization of the educational system has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, education may be easily supervised by the government. On the other hand, private initiative at the local level is discouraged. Under this system, education is financed and controlled by the state. No tuition is charged. However, as all costs are borne by the government, the number of school buildings is restricted because of lack of funds.

This situation did not exist in the pre-colonial period as the government neither financed nor closely controlled the schools. Classes were held in the teachers' homes, in the pagodas, or in a community building made available by the village council.

The idea of a formal school building was introduced by the French, and as students were no longer forced to study Chinese characters but rather the French language, the method of teaching also changed. Under the French regime, nearly all communities were provided with a three-room school and major communities with a six-room school, but, on the other hand, the number of secondary schools was very small.

In contrast, one step taken by the French was the establishment of three girls' secondary schools at Hanoi, Saigon and Hue. This was a profound change as, prior to the French presence, girls were given very little opportunity to study. Parents were afraid that they would neglect their household duties if they attended school.

Only one University was created - at Hanoi - to serve all of Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam), an area with a population of 25 million. Young Vietnamese who wished to do further studies were discouraged by the shortage of schools and high travel costs.

No Parents-Teachers Association existed in Vietnam to assist in keeping the schools in good repair. All measures had to be initiated by the government even when it concerned simple matters such as repairing a roof.

At the present time, to overcome the shortage of schools, the shift system has been adopted by the government. The number of school hours has been cut so that three classes may meet during one school day; one in the early morning; one in the late morning and early afternoon; and another in the late afternoon. The shift system, although only an emergency measure, has had some adverse effects on child-parent relations and on the health of the students, especially the younger ones. Also, parents and children in the late class have little chance to see one another after working hours.

During the past two years, the present government has tried to increase the number of schools, particularly primary schools. With the financial assistance of the International Cooperation Administration (USOM/Vietnam), the Department of Education has been able to give emphases to a broader program for meeting the many educational problems of V.N. Furthermore, many private schools have been established during the past five years. Nevertheless, this does not solve the problem at the secondary school level, particularly in the provinces. Most of these new private schools are not highly recommended from the academic point of view as well as from the point of view of their facilities, and some of them have taken advantage of the lack of schools to become very commercialized.

Though aware of this, the Department of Education cannot supervise all private schools due to the lack of personnel. To minimize this shortage of schools, the Department has recently created a new type of secondary school, the semi-public school. These schools are organized on the initiative of the community with the close collaboration of the provincial authorities. Their purpose is twofold: to decentralize gradually the educational system, and to encourage private initiative by giving subsidies to the semi-public schools in an attempt to reduce educational costs. Thus, this is a big step toward decentralization.

It is hoped that more secondary schools and universities will be built in the near future to meet the increasing needs of the Vietnamese youth. In Free Vietnam the lack of a basic education may become a real danger to the country as well as to the Free World with the constant threat of Communism. Therefore, providing an adequate education for every citizen is a vital task which helps in the fight against Communism as well as the maintenance of the principles of democracy.

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She received her B.A. in Sociology at Barat College of the Sacred Heart and her M.A. in the same field at the University of Chicago.

Now a Special Project officer with the Michigan State University Group in Saigon, she is doing research work on governmental departments - having primary responsibility for the studies on Department of Education. Two reports on this department are already published.

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