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Where be the 'magic bullet' for educational change? Vietnam and the quest of policy borrowing from abroad

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection upon my previous research on an educational reform initiative in Vietnam that was borrowed from Colombia's renowned Escuela Nueva model. In addition to being situated within the global phenomenon of policy lending/borrowing, or policy transfer, this case also reflects the prevalence of policy borrowing in Vietnam's contemporary educational policy-making. Through a reflection of Vietnam Escuela Nueva and various cosmopolitan traces within Vietnamese education policy-making, I will highlight the constant thread of Western modernity as an anchoring reference in the pursuit of educational change. In this particular context of Vietnam as a supposedly postcolonial developing country, learning from abroad is always a process intertwined with questions of coloniality.

Keywords Policy transfer · Vietnam · Escuela Nueva · Fast policy · Coloniality

"We teachers are suffering from 'indigestion' after experimenting with all these new foreign pedagogies," lamented Do Quyen, a primary school teacher, in an 2015 newspaper op-ed as she documented the dizzying array of new pedagogies borrowed from abroad that had been introduced into Vietnamese primary education in recent years (Quyen 2015).[1] This critique was articulated as part of a contentious public debate on right directions of educational reform for Vietnam. For many, the borrowing of progressive educational ideas, policies and practice from abroad provides a quick way to improve the quality of the Vietnamese education system through 'proven' educational best practices. Since 2010, at the primary education level

[1] For citations of Vietnamese in this paper, I use the author's full name in the convention of last name-middle name-first name, unless the author has indicated a preference for the Western convention (last name, first initial).

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alone, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has introduced a number of new initiatives and pedagogies such as the French program *La main à la pâte* for inquiry-based science education, the Danish method of teaching visual arts through music, and the Vietnam Escuela Nueva new school model borrowed from Colombia.

Many scholars have observed that for most countries around the world today, there is a new reality of educational policy-making that is increasingly global in character, emerging as a complex assemblage of global/local discourses, actors, instruments, processes and structures (Arnove 2013; Lewis and Hogan 2019; Tikly 2015; Verger 2014). Questions of educational policy are no longer insular to each nation-state or decided by local elites alone; there are multidirectional flows of influence that transcend national borders to inform policy processes, inflected by changing geopolitical and economic dynamics associated with globalization and driven by new policy entrepreneurs with more complex interests. The case of Vietnam Escuela Nueva illustrated some of these dynamics. The project borrowed directly from *Escuela Nueva,* a grassroots multigrade schooling model which originated in Colombia but was heavily inspired by Western principles of active pedagogies and brought to global popularity via the policy advocacy work of international institutions such as the World Bank and UNESCO (Le 2018a, b). Furthermore, Vietnam Escuela Nueva could not have happened without a generous USD 84.6 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), a global multi-stakeholder partnership and funding mechanism to support educational reforms in developing countries.

While educational initiatives funded by foreign aid rarely drew national attention in Vietnam due to their short-term and small-scale nature, Vietnam Escuela Nueva became a central public concern in the latter half of 2015. In a rare example of sustained, vocal and public criticism in Vietnamese mass media, a new piece on the project appeared almost every other day, with topics ranging from the misallocation of funding, the questionable quality of the textbooks specifically written for the project, the lack of teacher training and support, to the puzzle of why Vietnam was borrowing from Colombia in the first place. One bewildered online commenter wrote, "Why are we learning from a slow-growth developing country and not from places with progressive education systems like the US, the UK, and France?"[2] This question invokes a sense that certain education systems are more legitimate 'reference societies' to learn from than others (Sellar and Lingard 2013), but it accepts the premise that it is acceptable, perhaps even desirable, to learn and borrow from other education systems in the first place.

In this paper, I engage with this phenomenon of policy borrowing and reflect upon the various cosmopolitan traces within contemporary Vietnamese education policy-making through my research on the Vietnam Escuela Nueva project, as well as my own experience growing up in Vietnam in a period dominated by insistent

[2] Comment posted in the online discussion comment of "Bo Giao duc Chinh thuc Giai dap Thac mac Ve Du an Mo hinh Truong hoc Moi (VNEN) [MOET Officially Responds to Questions about the New School Model (VNEN)]", published on *Giao Duc Viet Nam [Vietnamese Education]* newspaper, December 10, 2015. Retrieved from http://giaoduc.net.vn/Giao-duc-24h/Bo-Giao-duc-chinh-thuc-giai-dap-thac-mac-ve-du-an-mo-hinh-truong-hoc-moi-VNEN-post164022.gd.

calls for educational change from stakeholders at all levels: parents, students, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, the general public, etc. In particular, I highlight the constant thread of Western modernity that serves as an anchoring reference in not only the specific case of Vietnam Escuela Nueva but also throughout Vietnamese modern educational history. Policy borrowing in Vietnam therefore must always be situated as a manifestation of coloniality. Though this paper draws only on my experience with the Vietnamese education system, perhaps it may resonate with other education systems that have been drawn into a common system of reference with Western ideals as the taken for granted yardstick of progress.

Vietnamese education: A patchwork of foreign ideas

The Vietnamese education system has always contained traces of external influences, from the pre-colonial adoption of Confucian tenets and moral education to the French imposition of colonial education in Western ideas of Enlightenment and progress, but only for the elites (Bayly 2004; Kelly 1998; Woodside 1991). The influence of external educational thoughts did not stop after independence. When beginning to construct its own formal education system, the government of North Vietnam largely adopted the Soviet model of education. Vasavakul (2000) finds evidences of Soviet influence on education in Vietnam beginning from the preschool level, with the adoption of the post-Tsarist kindergarten model to begin socializing children into future good socialist adults. The highest level of education in Vietnam was similarly constructed based on a borrowed model of highly specialized monodisciplinary university from the Soviet Union (Tran et al. 2014). In addition to explicit policy borrowing, the education system was also influenced by educational theories and philosophies coming from the USSR and other East European socialist countries. For example, textbooks were mainly translated or adapted from existing curriculum materials in these countries (Tran et al. 2014). Additionally, the main understanding of child psychology and child development came through translated texts from China and the Soviet Union (Vasavakul 2000, p. 223).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which in Vietnam also coincided with the beginning of the Renovation (*Doi moi*) period of open-door foreign policy and market reforms, policy-makers have engaged in even more voluntary learning from abroad. In the 1990s, the World Bank and UNESCO both supported Vietnam in conducting a national review of the education system in order to recommend directions for reform, and consultants from these two agencies also participated in the 1997 revision of national curriculum and textbooks (Tibbetts 2007). In the 2000s, Vietnam's commitment to the Education for All (EFA) movement and the Millennium Development Goals also attracted a lot of donors to support the development of the primary education sector (Kamibeppu 2009). Between 2004 and 2014, the country attracted approximately 2.2 billion USD to run 26 foreign-supported education projects (Thao 2015).

In the Education Strategic Development Plan 2011–2020, this open attitude toward international cooperation in education was formalized as one of the eight fundamental initiatives for the development of Vietnamese education by 2020.

This includes three tasks: (1) increase the number of teaching staffs and students trained overseas; (2) expand cooperation with foreign institutions to enhance Vietnamese institutions' capacity in both management and education, including research and professional development; and (3) attract international organizations, groups, individuals and the overseas Vietnamese to invest in and support education, participate in teaching, research and technology transfer and contribute to education reforms. As part of this overall strategy for international cooperation in education, Vietnam is also actively participating in activities led by regional and international organizations, such as summits, conferences and training workshops, in order to facilitate information exchange, lesson learning, and gaining exposure to best education practices from abroad.

This openness to learning and cooperating with international actors in education can appear quite contradictory to the political nature of education where education is regarded as a state's ideological project for political socialization, national consolidation and the formation of good citizens (Kaplan 2006). In Vietnam in particular, the Vietnamese Communist Party still maintains absolute control over official curriculum and what it permits to be taught (Großheim 2018). However, one must also account for the cultural pride in 'Vietnamization,' or the idea that Vietnamese have always been successful at adapting ideas from foreign cultures to the unique context of Vietnam, a recurrent theme in Vietnamese curriculum and official propaganda (Tibbetts 2007, p. 144). This narrative that many Vietnamese people have embraced points to the nation's strong ability to appreciate the finest achievement of world cultures while still maintaining unique national traditions and identities. Ho Chi Minh is often held up as the exemplary in the ability to use his learning from abroad to contribute to national development. Vietnamese textbooks place a special emphasis on the moment when Ho Chi Minh stepped on a steam ship departing Vietnam toward France in 1911 as the beginning of his revolutionary career, framing this moment as 'Uncle Ho left to find the way to liberate our country.' Arguably, the implicit lesson in this anecdote is that to save Vietnam from its enemies, whether actual foreign aggressors or the enemy of backwardness and poverty, one must look abroad and then adapt the lessons to the local context of Vietnam.

Indeed, from the time of independence to the late 1980s, most of the Vietnamese intellectual and political elite class were sent to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries to receive their higher education (Tran et al. 2014). These Soviet-trained individuals have dominated the ranks of educational leadership and senior academics in higher education institutions and research institutions in Vietnam in the past few decades. However, one can also witness the rise of a new crop of elite who were young enough to have received some form of education in the Western capitalist world. For example, Nguyen Thien Nhan who served as Minister of Education from 2006 to 2010 was a Fulbright scholar who studied public finance at the University of Oregon. A Vietnamese scholar remarked that Nguyen Thien Nhan was particularly outward-looking during his term as education minister and played a decisive role in bringing multiple large-scale international projects to Vietnam such as Vietnam Escuela Nueva or the PISA assessment program (personal interview June 2015). Western-trained individuals such

as Mr. Nhan and countless others in Vietnam can be said to function as 'merchant of ideas,' facilitating the flow of information and knowledge from abroad back to their home country (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

Furthermore, the official welcoming stance toward international cooperation has led to an increasing number of international meetings, conferences, and training courses through which state bureaucrats and other educational stakeholders become embedded in the 'global educational policyscape' (Carney 2009). As Samoff (2013) argues, alternative channels such as international conferences on education, international standards and league tables, and publications are as powerful as international actors in establishing the boundary of the hegemonic 'horizon of imagination' of what can be conceived as best practices in international education development. It is through these meetings, conferences, and publications endorsed by the World Bank, UNESCO, or OECD that educators worldwide come to share the same ideas about universal educational goals, policies, and best practices.

Such was also the case of Vietnam's encounter with Colombia's Escuela Nueva model. The official story of Vietnam's decision to adopt *Escuela Nueva* began in 2009, when the then Deputy Minister of Education of Vietnam encountered Dr. Vicky Colbert, co-founder and current director of *Fundación Escuela Nueva*, at a regional conference on successful rural educational reforms organized by the World Bank (An 2015). The Vietnamese policy-maker was so impressed by the *Escuela Nueva* model that he organized an official visit to Colombia to observe the model which prompted the decision to apply this model to rural, disadvantageous schools in Vietnam. The historical support that the World Bank and UNESCO have shown to *Escuela Nueva* also gave it further legitimacy as a universal 'best practice' that can be transferred from Colombia to Vietnam. Other unofficial, contesting accounts also emerged. A scholar involved in education policy-making in Vietnam, though not with this project itself, mentioned that Vietnamese policy-makers strategically chose *Escuela Nueva* in their grant application to the Global Partnership for Education so as to have the best chance of winning the grant (personal interview, June 2015). In other words, the use of *Escuela Nueva* provided a 'flag of convenience' to signal to international donors that Vietnam was willing to follow endorsed practices (Lynch 1998). These different narratives reveal the complex dynamics of power and agency at play in a transnational policy environment populated by a variety of actors with different levels of resources, knowledge, and goals.

Nevertheless, the inspiration of wanting to look abroad for ideas supporting educational change appears to serve as an anchor for these policy encounters and adoption processes. The question remains: why borrow, and why borrow *Escuela Nueva* in particular? It is likely an impossible task to pinpoint one causal factor—this belies the multi-causality of social reality (Tikly 2015). In the section below, however, I will use some vignettes of moments that stood out to me during my research to bring together some common threads that can provide insight into this phenomenon of learning from abroad.

Why Escuela Nueva?

Vignette One When I asked the senior advisor to the Vietnam Escuela Nueva project why adopt a model from Colombia rather than developed countries, he answered:

> You must realize that *Escuela Nueva* is just another model of Western education. The West has been practicing these pedagogies for decades already. What we are trying to learn from Colombia in particular is how to transition to that Western model. Colombia is another developing country like us, they started from the same conditions. If they can do it, so can we.

Vignette Two An implementation support meeting between MOET and the project's foreign implementation partners began with a video of an actual Vietnam Escuela Nueva classroom, where students sat in groups and conversed excitedly about their lessons. They sang and played games; they led class discussion; they organized a yogurt sale to raise money to repaint their school. The video was not subtitled; neither did it appear to be professionally edited. Why was it shown in a meeting with primarily foreigners then? Perhaps the video was not for the foreign audience but for the Vietnamese audience in the room. Around me, other project officers were whispering, "They act like Western children!" "Is it scripted?" "No, I was there, they really are like that all the time." There was a sense of wonder in the room. The question of whether this video was scripted signified the level of uncertainty that even those most intimate with the project still had regarding its effects: Was it really possible that these new vocal, active and modern Vietnamese children were emerging from this project?

Vignette Three One parent at a rural school that had just started implementing Vietnam Escuela Nueva said to me, "You know, the rural children here are not talkative and smart like those in the cities or those in the West. They need to learn to speak up more and be confident if they want to succeed in this global economy, and it's good that they're learning that now."

Vignette Four I asked the vice principal of the same school how he had supported teachers to learn about the new Vietnam Escuela Nueva model. Because this school was not receiving the official GPE grant money but had decided to voluntarily adopt the model anyway, most of the teachers could not attend the official training. Instead, the vice principal had arranged a study tour to a private international school in a nearby gated community. "We observed how they organized and taught in the Western way."

In these vignettes, the imaginary of the West weaves in and out of the Vietnamese encounter with Vietnam Escuela Nueva at all levels and in various different contexts. In other words, the *Escuela Nueva* model might have been the official name for this new educational initiative, but it only became meaningful to Vietnamese policy-makers and practitioners through evoking discourses of Western education and modernity.

The coloniality of policy lending and borrowing

Comparative and international education scholars have long been interested in this phenomenon of policy lending and borrowing, also known as policy transfer, like the case of Vietnam Escuela Nueva (Arnove 2013; Steiner-Khamsi 2012; Verger 2014). In this literature, world society theory, also sometimes called the 'world culture' approach, has been one of the most widely used lens to explain why some educational ideas can become globally-travelling ideas (Steiner-Khamsi 2012; Waldow 2012). World society theory is a neo-institutional theory that views global educational convergence as a process of nation-states' voluntary acceptance of world culture scripts in order to gain international legitimacy as modern state (Meyer et al. 1997; Ramirez 2012). For example, in education, one of the prevailing world culture scripts is the idea of active pedagogy as a 'best practice,' which is also one of the central ideas underlying the Escuela Nueva schooling model (Tabulawa 2003; Le 2018b). For many scholars who follow world society theory, policy transfer is a process driven by rational policy-makers who purposefully and voluntarily look to other countries to find effective and proven solutions to their educational issues at home.

World society theory has come under intense criticism from scholars of the Globally Structured Educational Agenda (GSEA) approach, inspired by Wallerstein's world systems theory (Dale 2000). While world society theory views policy transfer as a voluntary and rational process, GSEA explains it as a process of policy imposition by powerful donor agencies and other actors from the Global North as they seek to govern the development agendas in the Global South (Dale 2000; Silova and Rappleye 2015; Tabulawa 2003). The salient presence of the World Bank throughout Vietnam's encounter with Escuela Nueva is a reminder of the powerful role it plays in structuring educational agendas around the world, whether through its original capacity as a financial bank or through its evolved identity as a 'knowledge bank' in development (Klees et al. 2012). International organizations such as the World Bank do not only control the money; they also control alternative channels of influence through their predominance in research production, international conferences organization, and the establishment of international standards and league tables (Robertson 2012; Samoff 2013). Even in cases that would appear to be South–South transfer such as Vietnam Escuela Nueva, it would be more accurate to view them as North–South-South transfers (Le 2018b; Steiner-Khamsi 2009).

Scholars following the GSEA approach tend to critique World Culture Theory for being methodologically blind to the complex systems of power underlying seemingly 'voluntary' borrowing of supposedly universal best practices in education that always originate from the core countries (Carney et al. 2012). However, more meso-level studies of policy transfer cases have revealed the mediating factors such as political will and domestic politics that makes it rare for contemporary policy transfer to be a complete imposition from elsewhere (Luschei 2004; Steiner-Khamsi 2012; Takayama 2010; Tarlau 2017). Negotiation also happens at the local level of policy enactment as global policies encounter existing local cultural scripts of beliefs, knowledge and practices (Le 2018a). As Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (2003) noted, while the same

'global policyspeak' can be heard in many locations, local educators on the ground will always transform the meaning of this policyspeak or resist it entirely.

In other words, specific instances of policy transfer are likely to fall in the middle of the continuum between voluntary borrowing and policy imposition, and they are always certainly mediated at the local level during policy enactment. Some have critiqued this observation to be the current impasse in the policy transfer literature, where "similar findings of 'diffusion' and 'indigenization' saturate the field, but where only slight national and regional differences are highlighted" (Gulson et al. 2017, p. 228; see also Silova and Rappleye 2015). In this regard, some scholars are moving back to a multi-scalar approach to studying policy mobilities that pay particular attention to emerging global regimes and discourses such as the OECD's PISA and its various offshoots, the search for global learning outcomes, and ideas about accountability and privatization (Auld and Morris 2016; Lewis and Hogan 2019; Steiner-Khamsi 2013; Tikly 2017; Verger 2014).

What this new trend in research highlights is a troubling contemporary global landscape of educational policy-making that can be described as an era of 'fast policy' (Peck and Theodore 2015). There is a proliferation of supposedly evidence-based 'best practices' that in fact rely on contested evidence (Steiner-Khamsi 2013), a desire for politically expedient 'magic bullets' fixes to the system (Lewis and Hogan 2019), and an emerging industry of educational expertise to participate in processes of policy persuasion (Auld and Morris 2016). As Lewis and Hogan (2019) expresses, "the policymaking process shifts from emphasizing the design of local, contextually aware policy interventions to instead encourage a looking abroad for policy shortcuts, or readymade examples of what works" (p. 3). It also produces narrower understanding of what can count as legitimate 'best practices' in education.

However, in a postcolonial context like Vietnam, to what extent is this new? On the contrary, the reason I began this reflection piece with the French colonial influence on Vietnamese education policy, tracing it to Soviet socialist modernist inflection and through to contemporary obsession with Western ideals as manifested through Vietnam Escuela Nueva, is to highlight the continuity. In Vietnam, ideas about ideal educational changes have always been influenced by something external—to visions of modernity imbued in more powerful countries, from the French/Western Enlightenment civilizational project to Marxist-Leninist revolutionary modernity and back again. In this sense, I agree with world society theory that ideas of modernity figure strongly in Vietnam's educational policy-making processes, but this is also by no means a process free of power and conflict.

The question of why borrow, or why learn from abroad, is therefore always absolutely a question of coloniality, to draw on the work of Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011). 'Coloniality of power' refers to the ongoing persistence of a hierarchy between the global metropole and its peripheries, reproduced not only by unequal distribution of material resources but also reflected in the geopolitics of knowledge production and the push toward a monoculture of thought (Shahjahan 2011; Takayama et al. 2017). Actors from the peripheries can engage in strategic action, often to appropriate these mechanisms for their own advantages, but ultimately they are still influenced, guided, and constrained by this hierarchy of coloniality. In education specifically, the coloniality of knowledge production is at play through the

emergence of singular Western models and abstract global universals such as the OECD's PISA, international higher education rankings, or notions of active pedagogy which are then used as yardsticks to measure the performance of peripheral countries like Vietnam (Silova et al. 2017). In Vietnam, the pressure to learn from abroad is in many ways driven by the implicit assumption that 'best' practices exist, and that this 'best' is found either in the West or supported by Western-dominated knowledge production.

Part of the pressure is also heightened, again, due to Vietnam's current embeddedness in the global education policyscape. It occupies a particularly interesting position: Vietnam is a traditional aid recipient, a 'policy borrower,' but it is also emerging as a potential 'lender' due to high performance on global indicators of educational progress in both access and quality (Dang and Glewwe 2018; Iyer and Moore 2017). In particular, Vietnam's high results on the PISA 2012 and 2015 have drawn the attention of many global educational stakeholders to this country as a potential laboratory for 'best' practices for educational change in a context of constrained economic resources (Glewwe et al. 2017).[3] In other words, perhaps Vietnam's education policies may also become 'magic bullets' for other education systems in the Global South, even as Vietnamese policy-makers persist in searching for fast policy solutions from abroad to further increase the country's performance on global educational indicators. The danger is when well-intentioned searches for educational changes end up reproducing the type of fast policy-making still rooted in coloniality, and one of our tasks as scholars of educational change is to challenge this trend.

Where be the 'magic bullet' for educational change in Vietnam then? Perhaps we have learned enough from abroad, and it is now time to gather as a collective community, from educators to students to parents and policy-makers, to reimagine educational policy and practice in a way that transcends pre-given assumptions and discourses. To draw on decolonial scholars Andreotti, Stein et al. (2015), this will likely entail a disruption of our desires, fears, and assumptions of what is good; it will mean letting go of fantasies of certainty, quick fixes and 'magic bullets,' security and control; it may well mean "reaching the edge of our knowing and being—and jumping with our eyes closed" (p. 37).

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[3] Some critics have suggested that Vietnam's high performance on the PISA is due to its low secondary enrollment rate, third lowest in all the countries participating in PISA 2015. In other words, the students who remain in school by the time they take the PISA test (age 15) tend to be from a higher socioeconomic status (Steiner-Khamsi 2019).

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