
Teachers' Status in Vietnam: Social, Historical, and Cultural aspects

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Abstract

The article examines the Vietnamese teachers' high status in its society to identify the main attributes of its formation. The article employs qualitative historical analysis as a methodological approach to gain a clear understanding of different factors through different periods of time. The study analyzes written and oral sources of documents that address national, regional, and global perspectives on teacher status in society. Results of the historical analysis identify the critical importance of social, historical, and cultural factors in the formation of teachers' high status including the stable and significant roles of teachers in society, the maintenance of their roles throughout the long history of the nation, and the ever-changing performance so that they could best contribute to the nation and to the people. It is expected that findings in this study draw the attention of other countries as a useful reference while they are dealing with the serious decline in teachers' social status.

Keywords:

Cultural factors, historical, social, status, teaching profession, Vietnam

Introduction

According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD, 2019), more than 90% of Vietnamese teachers view their profession as the most prestigious career in the country. In fact, Vietnamese teachers have a special social status in their society. The long tradition of this prestige of the teaching profession is sustained as a crucial means to uphold teachers' role. As the old adages, "*One word [learned] is thanks to our teacher; even half a word [learned] is also thanks to our teacher*", "*No teachers, and no accomplishments*". These sayings indicate the respect Vietnamese teachers get as they do their jobs of teaching the youth of the country. At present, Vietnamese teachers still hold a relatively high status in society. Hence, from historical, social, and cultural respects, this paper sheds light on the formation of the traditionally high respect which Vietnamese people, in general, and generations of students, in particular, have for their teachers.

The purpose of this study is to identify the reason why teachers in Vietnam are highly respected and what other countries can learn from such traditions. This study is part of a twin investigation comparing the teacher status in Vietnam and Brazil. The study expects to contribute to the understanding of the current status of the teaching profession not only in the two participating countries but also as a reference to other countries of similar context.

Framework of the Study

Teachers are the primary workforce of a school since their roles and responsibilities tremendously impact the whole education system, the growth of young generations, and the general development of society. However, teachers' performance of their roles and responsibilities is strongly influenced by their status in society or their professional prestige under societal perceptions and understanding. A few decades ago, Turner (1988) defined teacher status as "*A bundle of socio-political claims against society which gives an*

individual (or more sociologically a group) certain benefits and privileges, marking him or her off from other individuals or groups” (p.11). The definition strongly emphasizes the social and cultural elements of status. In his definition, Turner also mentioned two different dimensions (objective and subjective) in which the former refers to a specific title or legal position assigned to an individual, while the latter indicates individual perception or awareness of his or her own prestige within his or her current social context. This subjective dimension is particularly important for teachers since there are cases when subjective status diminishes, and such leads to the limit of teacher objective status (Hargreaves, 2009). The social and cultural aspects of status are strongly emphasized in the concept. Besides, according to Hoyle (2001), status in an occupation is a multidimensional notion that comprises various factors. First, occupational prestige refers to *“the public opinion of an occupation relative position in a hierarchy of vocations”* (p.139). Second, occupational status is described as a classification given to a specific occupation by competent groups such as civil servants, lawmakers, and social scientists. Finally, occupational esteem is the admiration that the general public has for a profession as a result of the personal traits that its members are seen to bring to their main duty. Teacher status is also popularly defined by the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as *“both the standing or regard accorded them, as evidenced by the level of appreciation of the importance of their function and of their competence in performing it, and the working conditions, remuneration and other material benefits accorded them relative to other professional groups”* (ILO/UNESCO, 1966, pp.3-4).

From different definitions, it seems obvious that social and cultural factors are emphasized in the status concept. In fact, regardless of the various perspectives, prestige, status, and esteem are all considered components of the aforementioned status. Regarding the teaching profession, teacher status is compatible with the above dimensional investigation.

A historical mission of any teacher is to ensure the growth of new generations who are intellectually and morally grown, and to be ready for any challenges in their future. Teachers’ work impacts not only their students’ lives, but also the development of the whole nation in every aspect including social, political,

economic, and cultural changes. Therefore, teaching is a crucial profession and teachers deserve to have high status and respect in any societal and cultural context. In order to understand teachers’ current status, the cycle of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) with the participation of 48 countries conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) gives teachers and school leaders a voice to talk about their views on how society values their profession. As reported from the survey, most of the teachers enjoy the job they have been engaging in, and up to 91% are determined with their choice to become a teacher. Despite such, there are only 26% of teachers who think that their profession is valuable under public perception. This percentage among long-serving teachers is higher than younger colleagues suggesting that the subjective prestige perceived by teachers diminishes along their career path. Interestingly, in the list demonstrating the percentage of teachers who agree or strongly agree that the teaching profession is valued in society, Vietnam, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates are among the top countries for this tradition. Specifically, more than 92% of Vietnamese teachers believe that their job is strongly valued and respected by their society compared with the average percentage of OECD countries which does not yet reach 30%. With the same purpose of investigating teacher status, the Global Teacher Status Index survey carried out in 2018 to 1 thousand people in 21 countries (by the Varkey Foundation) indicates that teachers in China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Russia, and Indonesia are the top five countries where teachers are highly respected by their society compared to other countries. Unfortunately, Italian, Israeli and Brazilian teachers find themselves least respected. Teacher status reflects local cultural and social order as well as historical developments in response to how a society defines the aim of education and, as a result, the teacher’s roles and responsibilities.

Contextual needs and limits, as well as political realities and pressures, all influence teacher status. They represent popular perceptions of the school’s role in children’s education. This paper uses all of the above conceptions of teacher status and professional prestige to investigate the prestigious status of Vietnamese teachers. Furthermore, the study evaluates the phenomenon from political and cultural aspects throughout different historical periods.

Methodology

This study aims at investigating the formation of the current teacher status in Vietnam from historical, social, and cultural aspects. Historical research is chosen as the most suitable approach described as the methodical investigation of previous events in order to produce an account of what occurred in the past (Jovita, 2015). To understand the status of teachers in Vietnam which is strongly relevant to social and cultural factors, it is necessary to search for trends, understanding, and happenings or phenomena in the past that illuminate the key interactions in relation to contemporary hypotheses. This research employs available primary and secondary sources. The primary data sources mainly serve for recent time analysis, including governmental documents, journal articles, historical and educational books, photographs, and poems. The document analysis technique is utilized to interpret documents, giving them voice and meaning in relation to a certain evaluation issue (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis includes classifying content into historical periods in the same way that focus groups or interview transcripts are evaluated (Bowen, 2009). Since the history of Vietnam lasts more than 4000 years or so, most of the data collected for the ancient time is from secondary sources which are documents relating to the information that present past observations. Purposive sampling is utilized in the study. This sampling technique is *“based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned”* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). To achieve this study’s aims, the researchers collect documents discussing the history of the educational system and its teacher status in Vietnam throughout different historical periods. The documents include a number of legends and written documents that describe events hundreds of years ago. The authors attempt to critically analyze the materials by intensively looking at the events and problems from the viewpoints of data and the definite popularity of stories told in society. This study is part of a larger study investigating and comparing teacher status in Vietnam and Brazil. According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD, 2019), almost 93% of Vietnamese teachers report that their profession is respected in their country, while 11 % of Brazilian teachers lodge the same observation. These two contrasting observations of teachers from the two countries propel the authors to investigate the

reasons for the phenomena, to describe the events, and situations, and to produce the interpretation as accurately as contained in the collected data.

Results and Discussion

Hùng Kings (2500 to 257 BC)

This ancient period dates back 4000 years ago which may categorize the existence of this period as mainly a legend. Based on such a legend, Vietnamese people express their belief in their ancestors who were 18 Hùng kings, 18 out of 100 descendants of Fairy and Dragon parents (One hundred kings – The legend of ancient Vietnam). The belief tremendously impacts their general culture and lifestyle, especially on the stable determination of their noble roots and national unity. According to the legend, Hùng kings emphasized the importance of learning; self-development, and self-success. In particular, Hùng King XVIII once invited two famous teachers in the country to the imperial city to teach his two princesses. When the teachers passed away, the King and the nation mourned over their death. They also held funerals in their homeland’s old class and built a temple to commemorate the service and the contribution of the teachers (Luong, 2018). This phenomenon could just be a story, but it has been mentioned in daily stories about teachers in Vietnam, now and then, to inspire and remind how teachers have been respected and valued since the Hùng king period.

Vietnamese Feudal Dynasties and under Chinese dominations (257 BC to 1820 AC)

The most of great significance of this period is the development of each dynasty, the power fights against each other, and against Chinese dominations. There were 15 Vietnamese dynasties fighting and taking turns to rule out the country, however, each dynasty had its own contributions to the freedom, development, and prosperity in every aspect of the country. Nevertheless, owing to long Chinese dominations (accumulated over four different times), the country was influenced strongly by Chinese culture. As observed, the general influence of Confucianism on society and in particular, on education is significant.

Regarding the societal issue, the feudal government replicated the Chinese feudal format

which was characterized by a decentralized system with two main classes in society namely the ruling class including the king and nobles, and the lower class formed by the commoners. After hundreds of years of being ruled by China, Vietnamese culture and institutions were tremendously influenced by Confucianism, which set down the foundation for governmental order, social hierarchy, and value system (Berling, 1982). Confucianism is considered a system of social and ethical philosophy rather than a religion, embodying the ethical core of the society. According to Berling (1982), there are two sides to Confucianism philosophy, one is the so-called social rituals that involve the maintenance of commonly accepted values and norms for social institutions and basic human relationships (Berling, 1982). Within those, every individual has their own defined roles which do not detach from mutual obligation; each one has to be aware of and properly perform their roles. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism believed that correct and appropriate acts which are performed and assessed by individuals and their families could be a starting point to reform and perfect the society (Chan, 2020). As claimed, another side of such act is humaneness which could be translated to “love” or “kindness”, and they are not any single value, but they are sources of all virtues (Berling, 1982). Alongside Confucianism infusion, the Chinese language became Vietnam’s official language, and Confucianism literature was taught in its school.

Since education is closely attached to the social state, it was also strongly influenced by Confucianism. Education in this period already took its own priority. Hence, educated people who possessed Confucian knowledge were the most respected. Confucianism was affected by Yin-Yang, an ancient Chinese philosophical construct with two polar complements. Yin-Yang categorizes phenomena function which changes in relation to each other and the universe, (i.e., time with day and night, place with heaven and earth; and species into female and male categories) (Wang, n.d.). As a result of the Yin-Yang influence on Confucianism, teachers were only males. Teachers could be described as a gentleman who was proficient in the Chinese language and expert in Confucianism. He might not necessarily pass any official or high-level examinations, however, he was considered a role model with a standard ethical life, respected by

students and the local people, and loved teaching, opened their own schools to impart knowledge and “holy morality”.

Learning in this period could be highlighted with several main characteristics. Learning was for a whole life, from childhood until having passed the national exam where each person had only one teacher. Schools were built in teachers’ houses and by himself. The teacher taught Confucianism in preparation for the high-level exams, to know the right things, and to be good people, good leaders of the nation or their own community alongside bringing them pride to the family, and homeland (Hien & Tri, 2019). Confucian philosophy was the most highly respected, the icon of nobility, and the only learning content. Examination questions were based on Confucian philosophy which was mainly about the morality of gentlemen in the context of the exam. Meanwhile, students were aware that knowing Confucianism to pass the exams was the only and the most honorable way to develop themselves. Hence, after each national exam, the names of high-ranked examinees who would soon become famous scholars, and leaders were followed by their teachers’ names. However, if students failed the exams, they would come back to learn with the same teachers and retake the examination until they would have succeeded (Hien & Tri, 2019).

The special characteristics of Confucian learning help to figure out the significant roles of contemporary teachers. There are several old sayings about teachers’ roles and status which are believed to have been existing since this old time. First, there exists a stable order stated by Confucius in the societal principle “King-Teacher-Father”. The order means that there are three most powerful and influential persons in one’s life. In this order, the teacher stands before a father and he plays a more important role than the student’s parents. When one needed any advice to decide on something, they should have consulted their teacher before anyone, if not the King. Another phrase “*Tôn sư trọng đạo*” literally means “Respect teachers, respect morality”. This statement is uttered generation by generation and even written in every Vietnamese school building nowadays. It could be understood mainly as a tight connection between teachers and morality; having a teacher in one’s life means having morality, respecting teachers and respecting morality are two sides of one important value (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2019). “*One word [we study] is*

thanks to our teacher; even half a word [we study] is also thanks to our teacher” is also an invaluable expression of the teacher’s role. It simply states that no matter how much, how long one teacher has taught you, once you have called him “teacher”, he will be forever your teacher, and you have to respect him, remember his contribution to your knowledge for the whole life. “*No teachers, no accomplishments*” is another strong statement. Regardless of several critiques of this, it expresses the significance of a teacher and his teaching. No one can succeed in any aspect without asking, or being taught by a master. Or when someone is successful in doing something, they should remember the help, support, or teaching of their teachers. Last but not least, “*If parents want their children to be successful, they need to respect their children’s teacher*” is mentioned even these days as the principle both in education and general social context. In the Vietnamese language, those are two poetic sentences that everyone knows and practices. Parents behave in a polite, respectful manner to their children’s teachers. They listen to the teachers and follow the teachers’ advice. This perspective has a strong and long influence on Vietnamese education culture; therefore, this viewpoint will be mentioned again throughout other historical phases of education and society.

French Colonialism (1820 to 1954 AD)

The French colonialists implemented an extremely hostile and discriminatory policy toward Vietnamese natives (Quang, 2019). During the exploitation programs, the French opened schools with French or French-Vietnamese curricula which mainly taught in French, some in Vietnamese in rural and remote areas. To discourage Vietnamese youth from attending school, the colonial authority imposed regulations dividing primary education into five levels, in which pupils were required to achieve an elementary diploma and study in French at the two final levels after completing the third level (Quang, 2019). Many rural pupils dropped out of school as a result of the severe requirements, resulting in widespread illiteracy. According to statistics from 1914, only 20% of school-aged children in all three areas of Vietnam had the opportunity to attend school, while 80% of Vietnamese children were illiterate (Tran, 2009). Intentions of including the French could prepare them to be qualified officials and workers for the French and completely abolish Confucianism from a long tradition

and eliminate moral lessons including Vietnam nationalism, and patriotism. The program somehow also aimed to brainwash, enslave, and stupefy the people, falsify Vietnam’s history, and disseminate French culture. It was especially meant to prevent the intrusion of any progressive ideologies which could be from the Chinese or Japanese revolutions. As a result, 90% of the population was illiterate after the French defeat (Quang, 2019; Tran, 2009).

Teachers under French rule were those who chose teaching as their career, were trained with proper certificates, and were qualified to teach in a designated curriculum. In turn, they were employed and assigned by the colonial government to a vacant schooling place. Concerning teachers’ status, teachers were also ranked as the highest-class people owing to having knowledge and being the representative of the government to work with people. However, few intellectuals desired to be teachers since the country’s colonial position forced Vietnamese researchers to choose between nationalism and patriotism, and the ambition to modernize and westernize the country (Tran, 2009). They were struggling with the dilemma of being teachers who taught children but served the enemy to rule the nation, the values could not easily be balanced. Nevertheless, most of the teachers were nationalists who supported the nation’s political independence and political activities and took their practice schools as ideal places for meeting, exchanging ideas, and propagandizing revolutionary ideologies. Two of the most influential national heroes who used to choose to teach their first nationalism activities were Hồ Chí Minh, the first and the greatest president of the country, and Võ Nguyên Giáp, the first General of the Vietnamese Army.

Wars against France, Japan, and America

Very shortly after the Declaration of Vietnam’s Independence from France (September 2nd 1945), the French came back, followed by the Japanese involvement; soon later the Americans interfered and took over. The American war left the loss of millions of Vietnamese lives causing long-term and enormous devastation in every aspect of the country, e.g., the economy, education, and environment. After almost a century under French domination, including 30 years of resistance, and 20 years fighting against the Americans, the Vietnamese gained their full freedom and complete national unity in 1975.

From the aspect of education, it strongly reflects the society's current state. Right after the Independence declaration, the Vietnamese government publicly stated three national enemies namely famine, ignorance, and invaders. Meanwhile, the education system was serving everyone's life, politically-free, and mainly focused on educating citizens for a life of independence, freedom, and happiness. The system remained the French – Vietnamese system for a short time before cooperating with abroad organizations (e.g., UNESCO) to reform education and approach a more modern education system for their nationals.

Teachers' status during these hostile wars could be demonstrated firstly by their involvement in the anti-illiteracy campaign launched by the government. Everyone who was literate could be a teacher at the time. They taught, built schools, and classes, made or found teaching materials, and encouraged students (population) without being paid, regardless of day and night. The campaign with the endless endeavor of teachers aroused interest and passion for teaching and learning the national language. Teachers were demonstrating their highest respect status by unconditionally maintaining the spirit and characters of the educators, the role model of the whole nation. Especially, regardless of the deadly war still occurring, a number of teachers volunteered to be deployed to the south and served either in education missions (3.000) or in the battlefield (1.300 died - sacrificed) (Liem, 2009). In addition, teachers were particularly recognized as a multifunctional human resource throughout this harsh time. They convinced parents to send children to class, taught, protected students from booms, and ammo, and joined the labor force to increase production, and self-sufficiency.

“*Một dân tộc dốt là một dân tộc yếu*” [An ignorant nation is a weak nation] (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2011c), defeating ignorance enemy was the second ultimate mission, and teachers were the key actor in accomplishing the mission. Therefore, to portray teachers' status in this period, it could be rather ideal to employ several quotes from Hồ Chí Minh, the greatest teacher, and leader of the nation. He used to affirm and acknowledge the significance of teachers as such “*Người thầy giáo tốt – thầy giáo xứng đáng là thầy giáo – là người vẻ vang nhất; những người thầy giáo tốt là những anh hùng vô danh*” [A good teacher – the teacher deserves to be a teacher—is the most glorious person; good teachers are

unknown heroes] (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2011b). Finally, to declare the important role of teachers in the broader context, the education significance, he said “*Mục đích giáo dục bây giờ là phục vụ nhân dân, phục vụ Tổ quốc, đào tạo lớp người, lớp cán bộ mới*” [the purpose of education now is to serve the people, the nation, to train people, to train new cadres for the nation] (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2011a)

National reunification, after 1975 to now

On April 30th 1975, the country gained its absolute freedom, and complete reunification (Day of Southern Liberation for National Reunification). Since that day, the country is run by a socialist republic government approaching a communist state and one party. With the motto stated as *Independence – Freedom – Happiness*, the country has been the nation of its people and for its people. The Vietnamese economy is predicted to be the fastest-growing of the world's economies, and the 20th-largest economy in the world by 2050. Importantly, its education system has been continuously developed and enhanced, approaching the modernization and internationalization of national goals. The system has been applying and adapting the latest updated programs of UNESCO and other developed countries' systems/models (London, 2011). Education together with science and technology is the top priority; also, the investment in education is stated as the investment for development (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017).

Teachers' high social status and respect are maintained by the government and the society. Vietnamese Education Law reads “*Nhà giáo có vai trò vô cùng quan trọng - mang yếu tố quyết định trong việc đảm bảo chất lượng giáo dục, có vị thế quan trọng và được cả xã hội tôn vinh*” [Teachers play a decisive role in ensuring the quality of education, they have important position and are honored by the whole nation” (Luật Giáo dục [Law on Education], Chapt.IV.§66.Cir.1, 2019). A teacher in society is always mentioned and remembered as the image of a “ferryman” who carries students across a river – surpassing obstacles to reach the “far-flung shore” (Tien, 2017). There is also an old saying which is still used for teachers' role in this modern time, “*A bad worker can ruin some products; a bad engineer can ruin some buildings, but a bad teacher can ruin a whole generation!*”. In Vietnam, November 20th has

been chosen as “Vietnamese Teachers’ Day” as a way to nationally recognize the contribution of teachers (*Luật Giáo dục* [Law on Education], Chapt.IV.§66. Cir.1, 2019). On this day, the nation celebrates the day with great enthusiasm. It also is the occasion to thank teachers, and honor “Outstanding Teacher” or “People’s Teacher” bestowed for their meritorious services.

Teachers are particularly respected by their students’ parents regardless of their children’s grades or schools, from kindergarten to higher education. In people’s daily conversations, it is quite often to hear a parent talking to their children about their own teachers with great respect. Parents call their children’s teachers “teacher or professor”, exactly like the way the children address their teachers. Parents regularly attend parent conferences which happen three times every academic year. During the conferences, they willingly cooperate with teachers in supporting their children’s education, either inside or outside school. Most interestingly, Vietnamese parents never oppose their children becoming teachers as their career choice.

Students respect every teacher in their school. Respect is strongly demonstrated by students’ proper outfit, greeting, language expression, and gestures in any age, education level, school, or societal context. According to TALIS (OECD, 2019), 95% of teachers believe that students and teachers usually get on well with each other. In daily classes, students normally stand up to greet teachers before a lesson. They listen attentively to and follow teachers’ instructions, requirements, or guidance. In Vietnamese schools, there is no bad language or expressions about teachers. Besides, students annually visit teachers on Teachers’ Day and the Lunar New Year festival (3rd day). They keep in touch with their (head) teachers after finishing a grade or a course.

Nevertheless, alongside the high respect people in Vietnam have for teachers, they also have high expectations of teachers in terms of their performance and their roles and responsibilities, on how they lead their casual life they must be role models not only for their students but every citizen. Therefore, it is understandable when teachers in most cases are strictly judged and criticized for inappropriateness in every aspect of either their ordinary or professional life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Society in general and every respect of society has been changing. Teachers with their teaching profession naturally change as teachers are the main actors, and their profession is the core vocation of any society. The change is not propelled in a negative direction, however, there are some factors contributing to it. Firstly, nowadays, one student has lessons with 30-50 different teachers in their formal education. Secondly, with the prevalence of teacher force recently, students and their parents can choose the most suitable teachers for their learning needs. Finally, teachers these days are expected to do much more than just impart knowledge in the classroom. Naturally, it might pose challenges for teachers to sustain their productive teaching to meet the expectation of students and their parents.

Nevertheless, with the changes in society and respective changes in teachers’ roles, the respect of Vietnamese people is still properly placed on their teachers if they could meet and maintain several core requirements. First and foremost, teachers remain respecting their titles, position, and profession. As an available data, 99% of teachers in Viet Nam cited “the opportunity to influence children’s development or contribute to society” as a major motivation (OECD, 2019). When they respect their job as teachers, they keep in mind their responsibilities and are aware that teaching is serving the nation, and the next generations, sacrificing for the better future of a nation. Secondly, continuously maintaining and developing teacher morals either in public or private life. In Vietnam, teachers are role models not only in school but everywhere, every time they start their teaching education in a pedagogical school, after and during retirement. Third, teachers are expected to continuously develop their professional capacity including their knowledge, skills, and attitudes (science, technology, and methodology). Nowadays, while we are encountering 4.0 industrial revolutions, teachers are required to continuously learn, develop themselves, and update the best knowledge, and skills. Lastly, teachers need to be always ready to be involved in social (educational) activities, to be social innovators.

Throughout the description and analysis, it is clear that the respect that Vietnamese people pay for their teachers has a long history, and it includes social and cultural aspects. Historical aspects prove

that regardless of any societal states, and specific roles and responsibilities that teachers perform, their core perception of their duty is serving their nation, their people, and especially their education system. Social and cultural aspects emphasize that in each period, the country encounters different challenges and opportunities, however, in any situation teachers play a critical role in educating people for contemporary society and in preparing the next generations who could contribute effectively to the development of society, and who could lead a positive life for themselves. Most importantly, teachers are role models not only for their students but to the nation's people professionally and morally. Therefore, in any societal status, it is recommended that teachers should play and maintain key roles in society, that is the way they contribute the best to society, and as a result, the social respect paid for teachers is guaranteed. Respect is a significant condition for teachers to stay in their job and perform the best for their duty.

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