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Sorting or supporting teachers? An exploration of the imbalanced role of classroom observation in the development and assessment of Vietnamese secondary schoolteachers

Tran Kiem Minh^b, Dang Tien Dung^c, Hoang Thi Kim Hue^c, Nguyen Thi Huong Giang^b, Vanessa Cui ^a and Matt O'Leary ^a

^aBirmingham City University, Birmingham, UK; ^bUniversity of Education, Hue University, Hue, Vietnam; ^cHanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

In 2018, Vietnam's National Teacher Education Programme established a new framework for schoolteachers' professional development. Classroom observation was the dominant method used for teacher monitoring, assessment and development. This paper explores the use and impact of current classroom observation policy and practice on novice teachers in Vietnamese secondary schools. Our study draws on qualitative data from 35 semi-structured interviews across four provinces. Our findings revealed ongoing policy-practice tensions, with the prioritisation and dominance of classroom observation as an assessment tool for sorting rather than supporting teachers. These tensions were indicative of a wider policy-practice disconnect enshrined in recent reform by the Ministry of Education and Training that advocated the adoption of lesson study as the preferred national approach in schools. However, the experiences of our participants reflected a very different picture in practice that reinforced traditional hierarchies of power associated with evaluative models of observation that are designed to standardise and rank teachers' classroom performance rather than develop the quality of teaching. Instead of the more collaborative and collegial ethos typically associated with inquiry-based approaches like lesson study, observation was being used largely as a high-stakes assessment, resulting in increased levels of anxiety and stress among teachers.

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Introduction

Education reform has been at the centre of Vietnam's economic transformation in recent years (e.g. Le *et al.* 2022). Government policy has identified teacher development as a key driver in improving the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam produced its National Teacher Education Programme (MOET 2018), which emphasises the importance of teachers investing in and evidencing their ongoing professional development as a means of

CONTACT Matt O'Leary  matthew.o'leary@bcu.ac.uk

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meeting the demands of the general education curriculum (Dejaeghere *et al.* 2021, Tran *et al.* 2020). As is the case in many educational contexts globally, classroom observation has been used as the dominant method for monitoring, assessing and supporting teacher development in Vietnamese secondary schools (e.g. Tsukui 2018). As part of the ongoing education reform, the use of classroom observation in Vietnam has undergone substantial development over the last two decades. Recent policies have attempted to reposition classroom observation from a longstanding dependence on its use as a tool for evaluating teacher performance to a method of inquiry for teachers to learn about their students' learning and behaviour in the classroom. Alongside this, there has been a growing body of scholarly work on the use of the Japanese model of lesson study in Vietnam since it was first introduced in the Bac Giang Province in 2006 (Saito *et al.* 2008).

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese secondary schoolteachers' and school leaders' of engaging with observation as a tool for assessing and supporting teacher development. During the early stages of the project, the research team identified a gap in the associated research literature on the use of classroom observation for novice schoolteachers' learning and development in Vietnam. To contribute to the scholarly community's understanding of this topic and to address this gap in literature, the project was designed with the following two research questions (RQs):

- (1) What are the perceptions of novice teachers, core teachers and school leaders of how classroom observation is used in secondary schools in Vietnam?
- (2) What are the experiences and perceptions of novice teachers and core teachers (mentors) in using observation to support teacher development in secondary schools in Vietnam?

The first half of the paper provides a synopsis of some of the salient themes and issues from the cognate literature on classroom observation in Vietnam, along with recent policy reform on teacher development and the mentoring of novice teachers. The second half of the paper focuses on discussing the key findings from a qualitative research study involving educators from a range of secondary schools across four provinces in Vietnam.

Research on classroom observation in Vietnam

Traditionally, classroom observation has been relied upon as the main method of assessing and supporting teacher development in Vietnamese schools (Truong *et al.* 2021). Recent research by Tran and Nguyen Thi (2019) revealed a consensus between teachers and principals that observing others and being observed was considered one of the most important forms of professional development for teachers to engage in, as it provides a source of reciprocal peer learning in terms of acquiring new subject knowledge and pedagogic skills. Other studies have focused on exploring how classroom observation has been used in relation to recent education reform in Vietnam (e.g. Tsukui *et al.* 2017, Tsukui 2018). Tsukui *et al.* (2017) used a grounded theory approach to investigate the values and characteristics of teacher observations in order to understand student learning in Vietnam. Their study used a unique data collection method based on teacher presentations that described and illustrated events that took place during lessons using digital images the teachers had produced themselves. Tsukui *et al.* (2017) identified

what they labelled as the ‘compliance-with-a-plan’ characteristic as a major barrier to Vietnamese teachers’ ability to embrace the value of observation as a tool of ‘exploration’ for teacher learning. According to Tsukui *et al.* (2017), this ‘compliance-with-a-plan’ restricted teachers from engaging with observation as a lens through which to interpret what is happening in each teaching situation in relation to unique personalities and events in the classroom. In short, their study highlighted the importance of how when a teacher engages in the act of observation, this involves a dialogue between the act of seeing and their underlying values. Instead of observing to explore the meaning of phenomena that occur in the classroom, Tsukui *et al.*’s research revealed that when Vietnamese teachers engage in observation, their primary purpose and focus is to evaluate the success or failure of the teacher’s classroom performance. It is important to acknowledge, however, that their study was limited in its empirical data as they chose to focus on only one case to see how a teacher can transform the values of classroom observation.

In a follow-up study in 2018, Tsukui used a case study approach to examine the meaning of classroom observation in the context of education reform in primary schools in the rural province of Bac Giang in Vietnam. The research identified a culture of continuous surveillance and anxiety among teachers, culminating in their compliance with tailoring what they did in the classroom to satisfy the evaluator’s interests. Ultimately, for the observed teacher, a successful lesson was deemed to be one that won the approval of the observer (Tsukui 2018, 106). Tsukui (2018) used the term ‘standard way of teaching’ to refer to a prescribed checklist of criteria for ‘effective teaching’ which was used by observers and observees as a central point of reference to shape the way in which teachers planned and delivered their lessons, together with the way in which their observers evaluated the effectiveness of those lessons. Tsukui’s research (2018, 104) revealed the ‘power of the lesson plan’ as a key driver in the evaluation process. Teachers were discouraged from deviating from their lesson plans on the premise that a carefully prepared lesson plan should serve as a reliable indicator of a successful lesson. Thus, for their teaching to be judged favourably, teachers were expected to follow this ‘standard way of teaching’, which prioritised a prescriptive, standardised approach, with little consideration given to the importance of responding to the spontaneous needs and reactions of their students during the course of the lesson. Tsukui’s research (2018) concluded that the evaluation criteria developed by the World Bank and the MOET had far-reaching impact on the use of observation in schools in Vietnam, as well as forming the basis for this ‘standard way of teaching’, which acted as a ‘socio-political tool to support the teacher being watched’ (p. 105). In other words, these criteria were deployed by the State as both a means of attempting to standardise teaching and as a centralised form of surveillance to control teachers’ practice, a feature of the use of observation identified in other international contexts (e.g. O’Leary 2013). Furthermore, there was little evidence that these criteria had any tangible impact on improving teachers’ practice (Tsukui 2014, 2020).

The Japanese model of lesson study has had a significant influence on observation policy and practice in Vietnam in recent years. Lesson study is a form of teacher professional development activity originating in Japan in the nineteenth century. It is based on a cyclical model of development that typically involves a group of teachers collaboratively planning a ‘research lesson’, observing a group member teaching the

lesson, meeting to discuss their observations and reflections and sharing what they have learnt about the process of teaching and learning (Lewis *et al.* 2006). A variation on lesson study known as ‘lesson study for learning community’ (LSLC) was developed in Japan, emphasising lesson observation and participatory reflection by teachers through professional teacher meetings. LSLC was introduced in Vietnam in 2006 and has since come to be regarded as an effective intervention for developing teacher-learning communities (Saito *et al.* 2011).

As part of a research project funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, lesson study was first introduced on an in-service teacher education programme in the Bac Giang Province in Vietnam in 2006 (Saito *et al.* 2008). The project focused on developing classroom observation and teacher reflection skills through a series of professional teacher meetings. The researchers faced several challenges in promoting joint classroom observation and reflective practice during the project. One of the biggest challenges was getting teachers to move beyond their engagement with observation as an evaluative tool for judging their colleagues’ teaching and students’ work and instead to use it as a means of sharing their thinking about practice and developing empathy and compassion. Encouraging dialogic interaction among teachers in the project also proved challenging. These challenges are illustrative of a deeper epistemological and methodological divide between the principles underpinning a model like lesson study and the way in which observation is conceptualised in the Vietnamese education system. While research to date suggests that LSLC has led to a change in attitudes towards the use of observation in some Vietnamese schools, its impact in secondary schools remains under-explored as most studies have focused on primary schools. Besides, Saito *et al.*’s (2008; 2011) research has called into question the extent to which Vietnamese teachers have embraced the principles of LSLC meaningfully and sustainably given their lack of ownership as it was introduced as a centralised diktat by the MOET.

In recent years, advances in digital technology have meant that teachers in developing countries like Vietnam have been able to take advantage of the benefits of using mobile devices to record lessons. In his research, Saito (2021) found an increase in Vietnamese schoolteachers using their mobile phones and tablets to record their teaching and to use these recordings as the stimulus for engaging in professional conversations or ‘vide-reflections’ (Saito and Khong 2017) with their peers. According to Saito (2021), these vide-reflections have triggered a change in teachers’ classroom practice and their attitudes to observation, notably an increased focus on their students’ learning in their professional conversations. These recent developments appear to have occurred at a grassroots level independently from formal systems of observation coordinated nationally and provincially. They are significant in terms of empowering classroom teachers with the autonomy and the authority to share their perspectives and reflections of their teaching.

Mentoring novice teachers

In recent years there has been an increased interest in research on mentoring newly qualified teachers (e.g. Hobson *et al.* 2006, 2009, Sunde and Ulvik 2014, Jin *et al.* 2021). According to Hobson *et al.* (2009), mentoring is defined as the one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee’s expertise and to

facilitate their induction into the culture of the teaching profession and the specific local context. Based on a review of the international research literature on mentoring novice teachers, Hobson *et al.* (2009) found that despite the benefits of mentoring for new and experienced teachers, mentoring practices were still undeveloped. Mentor preparation programmes are variable in nature and quality, often focusing more on administrative aspects of the role than on developing mentors' ability to support and facilitate mentees' professional learning. Such programmes are often voluntary and are poorly attended.

In recent work, Jin *et al.* (2019) explored the interaction between novice and expert teachers in China in the context of continuing professional development programmes. The study employed a model of professional learning that sought to capture the changes that occurred in novice teachers based on a qualitative analysis of audio recordings of novice-expert interactions after each lesson observation and novice-teacher interviews. Their approach provides insights into how novice teachers make sense of and change their teaching with the help of expert teachers. Jin *et al.*'s study suggests that the value of expert-novice interaction not only involves the exchange of professional knowledge between the two but also the ability to stimulate, maintain and provide feedback on novice teachers' practice, which can be instrumental in helping them to improve their professional learning in the early years of their career.

In the Vietnamese context, the mentoring of novice teachers is considered a fundamental part of their induction into the teaching profession as it supports their professional development. Government policy stipulates that the probationary period for new secondary teachers is nine months (MOET 2016), although it does not specify the specific content of the mentoring, instead leaving it to the discretion of mentors. During the probationary period, novice teachers work with a core teacher as their mentor, usually a subject department leader. Each novice teacher undergoes two assessed observations of their teaching during their probationary period. These two classroom observations are evaluated by their mentor and the outcomes of these evaluations inform the school leader's decision to sign off or continue the teacher's probation. However, there is a lack of specific detail in the policy documentation on the nature of support expected for novice teachers, along with their roles and those of their mentors during the probationary period. This inevitably means that experiences can differ considerably. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness and/or quality of these experiences as there is a lack of quality assurance in place to regulate this probationary work across provinces.

Methodology

This paper focuses on a study conducted by a group of experienced teacher education researchers from Middle England University in the UK and a group of teacher educators and post-doctoral researchers from a range of universities across Vietnam. We conducted semi-structured interviews with educators across a range of secondary schools in four provinces in Vietnam. We adopted a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Cohen *et al.* 2011). In terms of convenience, the sample participants (see Table 1 for a summary of participants' characteristics) were drawn from schools where the researchers already had established contacts. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a diverse profile of schools involved (nine upper secondary schools and three lower secondary schools).



Table 1. Summary of research participants' characteristics

Participant ID	Gender	Role	Years of Teaching	Subject	Type of School	School Name	Area	Province
Mb1	Female	Beginner	3	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Nguyen Hue	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mb2	Female	Beginner	2	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Chu Van An	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mb3	Female	Beginner	1	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Vinh Xuan	Rural	Thua Thien Hue
Mb4	Female	Beginner	1	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Nguyen Hue	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mb5	Female	Beginner	1	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Pham Van Dong	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mc1	Male	Core	13	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Nguyen Hue	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mc2	Female	Core	18	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Chu Van An	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mc3	Male	Core	19	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Vinh Xuan	Rural	Thua Thien Hue
Mc4	Male	Core	16	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Nguyen Hue	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Mc5	Male	Core	20	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Pham Van Dong	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Ml1	Male	Principal	13	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Nguyen Hue	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Db1	Female	Beginner	1	Biology	Upper Secondary	Tran Phu	Urban	Ha Noi
Db2	Female	Beginner	3	Geography	Upper Secondary	Le Quy Don	Urban	Ha Noi
Db3	Female	Beginner	3	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Db4	Female	Beginner	3	Physics	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Dc1	Female	Core	25	Biology	Upper Secondary	Tran Phu	Urban	Ha Noi
Dc2	Female	Core	13	Geography	Upper Secondary	Le Quy Don	Urban	Ha Noi
Dc3	Female	Core	11	Mathematics	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Dc4	Female	Core	13	Physics	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Gb1	Female	Beginner	3	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Quoc Hoc	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gb2	Female	Beginner	3	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Quoc Hoc	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gb3	Female	Beginner	2	Chemistry	Upper Secondary	Phan Dang Luu	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gb4	Female	Beginner	2	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Dakrong	Rural	Quang Tri
Gb5	Female	Beginner	2	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Ba To	Rural	Quang Ngai
Gc1	Female	Core	10	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Quoc Hoc	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gc2	Female	Core	14	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Quoc Hoc	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gc3	Female	Core	15	Chemistry	Upper Secondary	Phan Dang Luu	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Gc4	Female	Core	10	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Dakrong	Rural	Quang Tri
Gc5	Male	Core	20	Mathematics	Upper Secondary	Ba To	Rural	Quang Ngai
G11	Male	Principal	23	Informatics	Upper Secondary	Phu Bai	Urban	Thua Thien Hue
Hb1	Female	Beginner	3	Chemistry	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Hb2	Female	Beginner	2	Literature	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Hc1	Female	Core	10	Chemistry	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
Hc2	Female	Core	15	Literature	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi
H11	Female	Principal	20	Literature	Lower Secondary	Nguyen Trai	Urban	Ha Noi

(Notes: In each participant ID, the first letter stands for the name of the researcher conducting the interview. The second letter indicates the title of the interviewee (beginner, core teachers or school leaders). The last letter refers to the ordinal number of the interviewees interviewed by the researcher.)

Participants were drawn from the following subjects: biology, chemistry, geography, informatics, literature, mathematics, and physics. Novice teachers were those teachers with 0-3 years of experience (including probationary and post-probationary teachers) in public secondary schools in Vietnam. Core teachers were experienced teachers who were the novice teachers' mentors in this project. The interview sample comprised 16 novice teachers, 16 core teachers and 3 school principals across four provinces in Vietnam. A total of 35 interviews were conducted.

The research instrument included semi-structured interview questions that broadly elaborated on the study's two research questions. We conducted three pilot interviews including a novice teacher, core teacher and school principal in order to trial the interview questions. Following this pilot, we produced the final version of our interview questions (See Appendix 1 for interview questions). The interview questions focused on participants' perceptions and experiences of engaging with observation as a tool for assessing and supporting teacher development. The Vietnamese researchers worked in pairs to conduct the interviews, using a blended approach. Interviews took place in-person and remotely online from July to October 2021, dependent on the local conditions in place as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. About half of the interviews were conducted via the online meeting tool Zoom, with the remaining interviews in person. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke's seven steps (2013). All interviews were transcribed and coded in Vietnamese. The pairs of Vietnamese researchers who conducted the interviews carried out the first five steps in their pairs as they worked with the interview data in Vietnamese. These steps involved the researchers reading the interview transcripts in Vietnamese and coding them using anchor codes that were created based on the research questions and the literature review findings. For example, an anchor code on 'current uses of observation approaches in schools' was created to address research question 1. Through this process, detailed codes were developed which then were grouped into themes. For example, codes were generated on schools uses observations to formally assess novice teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills which then were grouped into the subtheme 'formal and mandatory approach used to rate teachers'. In Table 2, there is the list of themes and subthemes developed through this process.

The Vietnamese team then shared their coding and analysis with the UK based researchers to finalise the themes and findings from our research data. Relevant data for each code and theme were then translated into English, as the example below illustrates:

Mặc dù em cũng đầu tư hơn, cũng không thay đổi nhiều về phong cách, mà mình cũng nghe học sinh nói chuyện với nhau tiết dự giờ mình hơi diễn, mang tính chất không thật. Tất cả những tiết dự giờ em đều chuẩn bị, nhưng em không dẫn trước, có buổi em dạy lớp đó, đến tiết đó học sinh cũng rất là lo lắng và sợ trả lời không được.

For the observed lessons, I always try to carefully prepare the lesson. However, I have heard from students' comments that my observed lesson seems to be a demonstration, not real. There was an observation session that I did not tell students in advance, and then they were very worried about my teaching and afraid that they did not answer my questions well.

Table 2. Summary of key themes

Themes		Subthemes
RQ1: How is classroom observation currently used in secondary schools in Vietnam to fulfil national policy priorities for the assessment and development of beginner teachers, from the point of view of beginner teachers, experienced, 'core' teachers (mentors) and school leaders?	Dominance of evaluative approach	Formal and mandatory approach used to rate teachers rather than assess students' thinking Evaluative observations unrepresentative of 'authentic', everyday classroom practice
	Master and Apprentice model	Deficit model – role of core teachers is to identify the "problems" of beginner teachers and provide "solutions" Core teachers adopt an "expert" role with beginner teachers Conservative characteristics of older teachers influence their own professional development Beginner teachers expected to respect and not question practices of senior colleagues Authority of core teachers hinders post-observation reflective discussion The master-apprentice hierarchical relationship dominates teacher mentoring
RQ2: What are the experiences and perceptions of beginner teachers and their mentors in using observation to support teacher development in secondary schools in Vietnam?	Affective factors	Stress and anxiety for both core teachers and beginner teachers caused by evaluative observation Unannounced observations put pressure on beginner teachers
	Observation as a tool of professional learning	Benefits of interacting with co-workers in the subject team in order to improve teachers' professional learning Opportunity for supporting teachers' self-development and self-confidence

Strategies for strengthening validity were used to avoid selective and unrepresentative use of data (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Triangulation was embedded into each of the phases of data collection, analysis and writing. This included the use of several researchers and their multiple perspectives through the design, data collection, data analysis and writing up stages of the study. The Vietnamese researchers worked in pairs to conduct initial data analysis, then the research team reviewed the codes to reach a consensus.

Research ethics of this study paid particular attention to three potential issues during the project. Firstly, the relationship between participants was carefully handled as the core teachers and novice teachers in our project were colleagues working in a mentoring relationship in their schools. The purposes of our research were explained clearly to participants in the project participant information sheets which were written in Vietnamese. Interviewers followed strict confidentiality practices to ensure identifiable data were not shared with other participants during discussions. Similarly, participants were asked to follow the same practice and not to share their answers with their colleagues or to mention their names in the interviews. Secondly, discussing workplace practices and policies can be a sensitive matter and we understood that ensuring the trustworthiness of data was crucial to the validity of the research and how we handled sensitive issues during our discussions with participants. Again, assuring participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data in our research was fundamental to enhancing the trust between researchers and participants. Finally, conducting transnational research across institutions needed careful consideration. The project team followed the British Education Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA 2018) and

Middle England University's research ethics guidelines and procedures. Before data collection took place, ethical approval was gained from Middle England University's research ethics committee. A research ethics workshop with researchers from the UK and Vietnam took place, where key research ethics principles and practices were shared and discussed. One particular practice was to produce all the data collection documents (participant information sheet, consent form, permission of access request and interview questions) in both English and Vietnamese for accessibility.

Results and discussion

Four main themes were identified that linked directly to each of the project's two research questions. Each thematic category was broken down into a series of related subthemes which are captured in [Table 2](#) below.

Dominance of evaluative approach

Despite the widespread influence of lesson study across Vietnam and the emphasis on a learner-centred focus, a strong trend that emerged from the data across participant groups was that classroom observation was widely acknowledged as a formal and mandatory tool to assess and rate teachers' performance rather than assess students' learning. Many participants (e.g. Db1, Db2, Hb1, Hb2, Hc2, Gl1, Mb1, Mb4, Mc5) remarked that observation was primarily considered as an important source of data for measuring and judging teachers' classroom performance. Db1 and Db2 commented that their observers graded their teaching based on the criteria that were created by the MOET (2014). The MOET (2014) policy document (No. 5555) sets out the domains and criteria for assessing observed lessons in secondary schools. Secondary schools in Vietnam continue to use these criteria as the basis for their evaluation and ranking of teachers' classroom performance, reinforcing Tsukui's (2018) finding of a standardised approach to assessing teaching:

My mentor chooses some periods to assess me following the domains and criteria for observation of teaching and learning by MOET (2014) and the principal uses these results for the teacher ratings (Db1).

Several novice teachers commented on how the sole purpose of these graded observations was for the core teachers/mentors to undertake a summative assessment of their teaching 'with no supportive feedback' (Db3). The grades were used to rank these novice teachers' classroom performance and assess the extent to which they had fulfilled the criteria required for successful completion of their probation. These results formed the main source of evidence on which the school principal would then base their decision to sign off their probation, which resulted in the creation of a high-stakes assessment regime associated with the use of observation, as others' research has revealed elsewhere (e.g. O'Leary and Brooks 2014). This high-stakes use of observation was also a feature of teacher recruitment in secondary schools more widely. As one of the core teachers (Dc1) commented, performative lesson observations were commonly used as part of the selection process when recruiting new teachers, with candidates required to teach lessons for the principals and core teachers to observe and to rank. Although models of

observation like lesson study are designed to switch the observer's focus away from the teacher and onto the students' learning, our participants' data repeatedly revealed that it was still commonplace for observers' attention and their comments to focus exclusively on the teacher's performance:

Classroom observation is now encouraged to focus more on students' learning activities but, in reality, it is still mainly about assessing teachers (Mb4).

When asked what they typically focused on during their observations, the core teachers identified pedagogical and communication skills as their priority areas. While it is to be expected that observers would want to pay attention to the novice teacher's ability to demonstrate fundamental skills such as classroom management and their use of the blackboard, it was clear that the focus of their comments remained on the teacher's performance rather than the students' learning or engagement. Our data revealed a paucity of comments on what the students were actually doing in the lesson or their understanding. The following quote typified many observers' responses:

In terms of manners, I pay attention to whether the teacher speaks fluently, has good classroom management and the ability to cover the class. In terms of the performance on the blackboard, I focus on the science and logical structure. In terms of knowledge, I concentrate on whether novice teachers have got into the core, the main knowledge of the lecture or not (Dc1).

A strong pattern emerged in the interview data from both novice and core teachers of the inauthenticity of these formal evaluative observations in terms of how unrepresentative they were of everyday classroom practice. Some spoke of 'show lessons' where some teachers would simply repeat classes that they had taught successfully before in the past. Others commented on how they would spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for these lessons. Some teachers would even rehearse or provide their students with pre-prepared questions in advance of the lesson if they knew they were being observed (e.g. Db1, Hb2, Gb4). Given the high-stakes nature of these observations, it is hardly surprising that teachers engaged in gaming the system, a finding echoed in other studies (e.g. Saito and Khong 2017). However, both novice and core teachers were all too aware of the inauthenticity of such practice and how it failed to support teacher development:

Core teachers believe that a real teacher is someone who is able to solve problems well in the classroom for a variety of students and is flexible in using methods, active teaching activities, not just "acting" during class time (Mc4).

It is necessary to have a change in the regulations on the lesson observations, namely, it should not be too heavy on assessment and grading but focus on sharing and supporting each other for teachers' professional development (Hb2).

Master and apprentice model of classroom observation in teacher development

The relationship between core teachers and novice teachers was hierarchical and seemed largely to reflect a deficit model of professional learning. In the post-observation discussion, core teachers tended to focus on identifying the "problems" or "mistakes" of the novice teachers, providing them with "solutions" in the form of a list of

recommendations on how to improve. In short, the core teachers adopted the mantle of the expert. As one novice teacher commented, ‘My mentor will analyse my lecture to help me know my mistakes and how to fix them’ (Gb3).

One of the factors that seemed to be a key driver for this hierarchical relationship was the influence of engrained socio-cultural norms, namely the Confucianist tradition in Vietnam and the expected subservience of younger and/or more junior teachers to their elders. The core values and teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius are deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture and remain widely visible in the shaping of social relationships and the form and content of the educational system (e.g. Truong *et al.* 2017). Within the hierarchical discourse, older people are typically respected for their experience, knowledge and wisdom, to the extent that they are unlikely to accept the opinions or criticism from those below them in the social hierarchy (Ashwill and Diep 2005). Thus, in the context of professional learning, novice teachers are expected to respect and not question the practices of senior colleagues. According to one school principal, the lack of a progressive attitude and the authority of most experienced teachers can act as a barrier to post-observation reflective discussion:

In reality, many older teachers still feel uncomfortable when a younger colleague comments about their lesson or challenges them. Unlike the younger teachers, the older teachers usually do not have a progressive attitude in their work (M14).

Some novice teachers commented on how they felt uncomfortable in having to follow a rigid format in an observed lesson, echoing Tsukui’s (2018) critique of the ‘power of the lesson plan’. There was the suggestion that the autonomy and creativity of novice teachers was heavily circumscribed. Mb4 made an interesting observation that in a typical class that is not observed, teachers can work with students in a more ‘natural, authentic way’. In contrast, when delivering an observed session, it was mandatory for all novice teachers to strictly follow a prescribed delivery format:

For example, in fact, in the first session, I have not finished the lesson, then in the second session, I continue teaching the unfinished content of that lesson. But if that second session is an observed session, I am not able to do that (Mb4).

The interview data revealed repeated evidence of the prevalence of a master-apprentice, hierarchical relationship in teacher mentoring. In turn, these relationships yielded an imbalance in reflective discussions between novice teachers and their mentors, with limited opportunities for the former to exercise professional agency of the process, as they were expected to comply with the recommendations given by their mentors.

Affective factors: stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety emerged from the interview data as the most significant affective factors caused by evaluative observation:

I’m always stressed (Mb1).

I often have insomnia, tremors, sweating and nervousness (Hb2).

Some of the commonly cited reasons given that fuelled this fear and anxiety related to concerns about exposing their lack of subject knowledge and/or pedagogic skills, being

criticised by their colleagues or feeling pressured that they might underperform compared with other colleagues. Besides, some novice teachers were apprehensive because they were often observed by large groups of observers. On average, they were observed by 4-5 teachers, sometimes 7-10 and even up to 17 in one case. Although such practice is not unusual in models of lesson study, it seemed inappropriate and disproportionate given the primary purpose of these observations was to evaluate the teacher's classroom performance.

While the high-stakes element of evaluative observations discussed above contributed significantly to these affective factors for novice teachers, this was further intensified as a result of what they were expected to demonstrate within the time frame of these formal observations, which typically lasted around 45 minutes:

If there are lesson observations, I have more stress and anxiety. Firstly, in terms of knowledge, I have to guarantee the amount of knowledge and time distribution for each activity. Secondly, I need to apply diverse teaching methods to engage students in the class, but I am also obliged to ensure the progress of a lesson (four types of learning activities i.e. warm up, exploration, practice and application). I always feel so stressed about teaching everything in 45 minutes (Db3).

The comments from this novice teacher reinforced the hegemony of the standardised criteria used to evaluate their teaching (e.g. Tsukui 2018). Interestingly, multiple respondents remarked that in 'normal classes', there was no expectation to follow this prescribed format. Instead, they would focus on core content and were much more likely to adapt their teaching to the needs of their students in contrast to assessed observations where they were under pressure to perform according to an agenda determined for them and their students by others.

Some novice teachers expressed concerns about unannounced observations, as they argued that they did not have the opportunity to prepare sufficiently and thus were unable to showcase their skills and knowledge (e.g. Hb2, Db2). Others complained that they were working with a new group of students and had not yet developed a rapport with them or the teachers who were observing their teaching. While announced and unannounced observations were both commonly used in schools, unannounced observations seemed to be the preferred model for measuring and judging novice teachers as many of the participants remarked (e.g. Mc1, Mc4, Gc1, Gc4, Gb4, Hc1, Hp1). However, it was clear that the use of unannounced observations gave rise to a number of counter-productive consequences for novice teachers. For example, Db2, Hb2 and Mb4 talked about how these unannounced observations resulted in increased levels of stress and anxiety for novice teachers:

With unannounced lesson observations, I feel more anxiety and stress, even my students also have the same emotion. Because they do not have the preparation for the lesson, my students are scared that they cannot answer the questions right and cannot do well with my tasks. This affects the quality of the teaching (Db2).

In addition to the pressures experienced by novice teachers, core teachers were not exempt from such pressure either. Some commented that they felt under pressure to perform when they were observed as there was an expectation that as 'expert teachers' they should be able to demonstrate the full repertoire of skills from appropriate pedagogy to adept use of technology whenever they taught. For this reason, they felt the burden of

having to constantly remain up to date with the latest developments and to act as role models accordingly when they were observed:

It is true that lesson observation is very stressful right now, not only for beginning teachers but also for teachers who have about 30 years of experiences (Mc4).

An unintended but equally concerning aspect of the counterproductive consequences of these evaluative observations highlighted by some of the novice teachers was the impact that it seemed to have on some of their students, who were eager to support their classroom teacher:

Once, in an observed session, my students were very worried about my teaching and afraid that they did not answer my questions well. Then, when the observers left, many students asked me: “Is this class ok, Ms?”. Students are interested in whether the lesson is well assessed by the observers. Students understand that in such an observed lesson, students must try to be active and support the teacher so that the lesson works (Mb4).

Observation as a tool of professional learning

Novice teachers acknowledged that it was through the process of classroom observation that they were able to collaborate closely with core teachers in their subject area. Prior to their observations, they would share their lesson plans with their core teachers, who commented on them and made suggestions for improvement. The post-observation discussion was also seen as an important opportunity for these novice teachers to explore a range of aspects relating to pedagogy in greater depth with their experienced colleagues, drawing on their expertise as a source of ongoing development. Interestingly though, some novice teachers talked about their working relationship with their core teachers as being both ‘helpful’ and ‘uncomfortable’. What they meant was that while the core teacher’s role as a mentor in supporting their professional learning was recognised as an asset, some also identified a conflict between their dual role as a mentor and an assessor, which was the cause of tension in some cases.

Undertaking observations of their peers’ teaching was identified as another valuable opportunity for novice teachers to develop their subject knowledge and pedagogic skills, as others’ research has shown (e.g. Tran and Nguyen Thi 2019). This was not restricted to observing peers who taught their own subject, as some of the novice teachers commented on how they found it helpful to observe outside of their subject area to witness a range of teaching methods being used:

I will attend all subjects, not just one. Going to other classes really helps me to see different ways of teaching. Sometimes I can apply the method of this subject to my subject. I also see that I have learned from my own experience and learned a lot of things, especially the method. (Gb4)

Observation was clearly considered an important tool for novice teachers in terms of their professional learning and self-development. In addition to its value in learning from others’ practice and experience through modelling and discussion, observation was identified as a key catalyst for encouraging novice teachers to reflect on their own pedagogic thinking, decision making and practice. Novice teachers displayed awareness of the importance of engaging in an ongoing process of self-reflection in order to develop

their professional knowledge and skills. They also recognised the perspectives and experiences of their own students as another important stimulus for this self-reflection:

Firstly, I observed the behaviour of students in my class and asked questions like, “How do you feel about this lesson? Do you understand all of the parts of the lesson?”. I listened to all the comments of my students. Secondly, I had a diary to write all my reflections (Db1).

Encouraging teachers to see their practice through their students’ eyes echoes a recommendation from Brookfield (1995), who argues that it is important to draw on both our students’ and our colleagues’ perspectives to illuminate different interpretations of our teaching and provide different frames of references to understand them.

Concluding comments

In spite of recent developments in the field of classroom observation in Vietnamese schools, namely the widespread adoption of more learner-focused models such as lesson study, our findings reveal that evaluative approaches continue to hegemonise the way in which observation is conceptualised and applied in schools across Vietnam. Driven by a centralised national policy agenda that prescribes a regime of standardisation, high-stakes assessment and performance ranking, classroom observation has been appropriated as a tool for the State to exercise control over teachers’ work, resulting in increased levels of stress and anxiety with little perceived value for the teachers involved. Engrained socio-cultural factors like Confucianism and the propensity for professional relationships between novice and more senior teachers to replicate hierarchical delineations entrenched in wider Vietnamese society can make it all the more challenging to adopt new ways of thinking, being and doing that are underpinned by principles of collaboration and equality. As Tsukui *et al.* (2017) found in their research, compliance and subservience acted as a major barrier to Vietnamese teachers’ ability to embrace the value of observation as an exploratory tool for teacher learning. However, as big a challenge as it may seem to embark on changing engrained mindsets, behaviours and practices, our paper argues that it is a challenge that is not specific to Vietnam but is shared by education systems globally when it comes to observation. How can teachers and leaders move beyond their engagement with observation as an evaluative tool and reconceptualise it as a lens for inquiring openly and collaboratively into the complex interrelationship between teaching and learning? Our paper emphasises the need for a greater balance between the use of observation as a formative and evaluative tool for teacher professional development in Vietnam.

The high-stakes assessment-based model of observation currently relied on in schools in Vietnam appears to offer little in the way of meaningful teacher development or improvement in the quality of teaching and learning as a whole. Yet this is hardly surprising given that its primary purpose is as an assessment tool for sorting rather than supporting teachers. Besides, such models of observation disempower teachers from taking ownership and responsibility for their own development. Herein lies the answer to moving beyond this practice and it is an answer articulated by the participants themselves in this study, to be allowed the professional autonomy to explore and decide their own practice, with a view to identifying the priorities for own their professional development. As one of the novice teachers concisely put it, ‘we should focus more on sharing our good

practice and supporting our professional development instead of scoring how we perform all the time' (Hb2). Saito's (2021) recent research highlighting the increased cases of Vietnamese teachers' video recording their classes on mobile devices for their personal and shared reflections would suggest that there is a desire to exercise greater agency over their professional learning. All this points to the need for a greater balance between the use of observation as an evaluative and formative tool for teacher professional development in Vietnam. It is only when teachers are empowered to explore observation's formative potential that arguably their classroom practice is likely to reflect the innovations in practice demanded of them in government policy.

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Notes on contributors

Tran Kiem Minh is an Associate Professor of Mathematics Education at Hue University in Vietnam

Dang Tien Dung is a lecturer and researcher at Hanoi National University of Education in Vietnam

Hoang Thi Kim Hue is Head of Department of the School of Management at Hanoi National University of Education in Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Huong Giang is a lecturer at Hue University in Vietnam

Vanessa Cui is a senior research fellow in the CSPACE education research centre at Birmingham City University

Matt O'Leary is Professor of Education and Director of CSPACE education research centre at Birmingham City University

ORCID

Vanessa Cui  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0932-1874>

Matt O'Leary  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6493-5177>

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