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**The challenge of ensuring gender equality in Vietnamese and English high schools:  
espoused and real commitments**

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***Abstract***

***Purpose***

*This study comparatively examines the issue of gender equality in high schools in Vietnam and England.*

***Design/ methodology/ approach***

*Data gathering consisted of interviews with teachers in two high schools and the staff of a pedagogic university in Vietnam and staff of one high school and of the Initial Teacher Training department of a University in England. Data was analysed using a combination of grounded theory, cross-cultural study, and narrative analysis within a liberal feminist framework.*

***Findings***

*The main findings from Vietnam include that despite a strong commitment to gender equality by the central government both pedagogy and curriculum in Vietnamese High Schools fail to promote gender equality and that gender equality is, therefore, espoused rather than enacted. Findings from England revealed considerable success had been achieved in gaining equality of both*

*opportunity and outcomes but that a more sophisticated discourse on gender in education might be needed.*

*Value/ implications*

*Implications of the study include recommendations that more extensive training on gender equality is provided in both countries, but especially in Vietnam, in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and school leadership.*

*Keywords*

*Gender equality, gender policy, Vietnamese schools, English schools, teacher education.*

*Paper type*

*Original qualitative research paper.*

## **Introduction**

Vietnam has suffered a turbulent history and, for centuries, fell under the hegemonic influence of China prior to a more recent domination by colonial powers including France and the United States of America. During the long feudal regime society was paternalist in nature, which resulted in an educational perspective that not only favoured boys structurally but was also characterised by commonly held patterns of belief that boys were more able than girls. Although Vietnamese society has undergone dramatic, and largely positive, developments since the ousting of the US backed government in the 1970s, such viewpoints have tended to persist in much of Vietnamese society despite the fact that government policy has been one of complete equality of opportunity. England, by contrast, has enjoyed

a comparatively developed and stable economy over the last forty years and much has been achieved across society in terms of gender equality.

In this paper, our main focus is on attitudes to gender equality among Vietnamese teacher educators, high school teachers and students but we also offer an element of comparison with the same groups in England. The research also investigated extant government policies, teaching pedagogies, and curricular approaches in terms of gender equality in both countries using a combination of grounded theory, cross-cultural study, and narrative analysis within a liberal feminist framework. The subsequent analysis draws on the recent work of Unterhalter et al. (2014) which distinguishes between different kinds of interventions to enhance gender equality, each of which can be transformative but whose impact will be heightened when brought together. In our recommendations we also draw on the work of Bourdieu and his notion of doxa, which is defined as ‘that which cannot be debated or discussed’, to describe some of the current attitudes to gender in schools in Vietnam (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992: 199).

It is the purpose of this paper to outline the research undertaken on gender equality issues in high schools in England and Vietnam in order to explore and problematise the challenges that are faced by girls in these two education systems and, further, to suggest course of action that might address these challenges at both the system and school levels. In doing so we believe that historic cultural attitudes to girls and women continue to influence the way teachers treat students in high schools, especially in subjects which have been seen erroneously as more suited to boys, such as mathematics or physics, or correlatively, more suited to girls, such as literature and history. The paper concludes by offering recommendations to promote further gender equality, especially in Vietnam, with the hope that each student will have opportunities to achieve the most in education, regardless of their gender.

## **Background to the study**

### ***Theories about gender equality in education in developing countries***

Concerns have existed about the relative social position of women in what are now termed ‘developing countries’ since nascent feminist movements began in the nineteenth century (Chantler and Burns, 2011: 70). In more recent decades, in order to meet a growing aspiration for greater equality, the concept of gender mainstreaming has come to the fore, within which the focus is on making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design and implementation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated (True, 2010). However, this approach has been subject to a critique which suggests that it has led to only mixed and sometimes contradictory results (Stratigaki, 2005).

More recently, Unterhalter et al. (2014) have developed an impressive model of change in relation to improving gender equality in education based on a rigorous literature review of previous studies which drew on the understanding that girls' education and gender equality are affected by processes within and beyond schools. The model by Unterhalter et al. (*Ibid*) distinguishes between three kinds of interventions, including interventions which focus on:

- resources and infrastructure;
- changing institutions;
- changing norms; and,
- including the most marginalised in education decision making.

While each can have a positive impact, that impact will be greatest when a combination of different kinds of interventions comes together. For this reason, any interventions at school level also need to be part of a wider set of actions driven at national, local and institutional level.

Both the concept of gender mainstreaming and the powerful model developed by Unterhalter et al (*Ibid*), are very appealing in the context of Vietnam where there is evidence that public policy has failed to affect the educational outcomes of girls and women and the latter of these has, in particular, provided key perspectives in the conclusions and recommendations derived from the analysis of the data from the study reported in this paper.

### ***Policy on gender equality in education in Vietnam and England***

Confucian approaches from China influenced Vietnamese society for more than a thousand years (Bui, 2008). The main tenets of this belief system suggest that women should focus on a domestic role involving housework, care of children, and deference and support for their husband's family (Jiang, 2009:234). In addition, there is a strong tradition that wives should move into the husband's family home, and that married women are expected to have sons to continue the paternal surname (Le, 2008). As a consequence of this, girls and women in Vietnam remain in an inferior social position when compared to boys and men. This is evidenced by the fact that, across the nation, in both rural and urban areas, the level of professional qualification and achievement of men remains higher than women (GSO, 2009) because '*women and girls are the last to approach educational opportunities*' (Tran, Hoang, and Do, 2006: 156). This brings with it significant issues in relation to career choices and self-esteem for women and girls. For example, in teaching, female teachers

outnumber male teachers in total but comparatively few hold senior positions and they are preponderant in the early phases of education, whilst far fewer hold posts in higher education (MOET, 2011).

In order to address these issues, after many years of struggle for independence, in the 1960s the government of Vietnam began to promote gender equality (Vu and Ageraard, 2012: 105) including encouraging women to take up roles in the public sphere (Tran, Hoang and Do, 2006). By the late 1980s, the economy had developed and the need for labour had increased. As a result of this, women had more economic opportunities but the ‘patriarchal family ideals and practices’ remained (Vu and Ageraard, 2012: 105). In 2006, the government promulgated the Gender Equity and Education Law, which asserted the importance of equity in educational opportunities for female and male learners (Pham, 2007: 94). Then, in 2007, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control was passed to protect women from violence but its efficacy appears to have been poor since more than half of married women continue to report that they experience domestic abuse (GSO, 2010 cited in Hoang, Quach and Tran, 2013: 83). Thus, despite these laudable central government initiatives, women remain in relatively lower social positions than men (Tran, Hoang and Do, 2006: 15).

The English school system has, like that of Vietnam, been subject to considerable innovation and change in recent decades but many of these developments have focused on providing large elements of financial independence to schools. The UK government has made efforts to attain gender equality in education and there has been evidence that England has had more success in gender equality than have many other countries (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2011: 16). In gaining this achievement, one key factor has been the creation of legislation such as the Education Act in 1944 or the Equal Pay Act in 1970 (Arnot and Phipps, 2003). The needs of different genders were also addressed through

single-sex schools (Arnot, 2006) where girls were encouraged to take up a full range of subjects (Skelton and Francis, 2009: 15), although it should be noted that such an approach remains contested and controversial. Crucially, girls have made considerable progress in both compulsory and post-compulsory education (David, Weiner and Arnot, 2000: 25-26) and the statistics show that girls now achieve better outcomes than boys in almost all subjects (Francis, 2006) not only in the UK but also in other developed countries such as Australia, the US and Canada (Epstein et al., 1998: 6). However, once the differential in achievement shifted in favour of girls, a ‘moral panic’ broke out about girls outperforming boys in secondary education (Driessen and van Langen, 2013: 67) and a debate about ‘failing boys’ emerged with some attributing the comparative failure of boys in schooling to educational policies and teaching pedagogies that were presumed to be more advantageous to girls (Francis, 2006: 191). It should be noted, that there is increasing scepticism about this analysis since it can be argued that a shift in focus to the needs of boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds, though important, has served as a distraction from the problems that girls continue to face (Francis, 2006:188).

For these reasons we argue here that although UK feminists have gained extensive achievements and schools and authorities have paid more attention to girls in schooling than in the past, despite the fact that the ratio of examination success for girls is increasing faster than boys (Epstein et al., 1998), considerable challenges remain that need to be addressed. In recent years, evidence from national statistics and other research reveals that masculinists are calling for more focus on their concerns about ‘failing boys’ or ‘poor boys’ in education since ‘if one group wins, the other loses’ (Epstein et al., 1998: 4). However, girls are not necessarily the ‘success stories’ of reform in education since they often still lack confidence and this failure of assurance remains problematic even among girls gaining the highest academic results (Skelton, 2010: 131). Indeed, we would aver that the needs of

girls need to remain a key issue in educational discourse (Reed, 1999) in spite of the recent focus on ‘boys’ underachievement’ (Skelton, Francis and Read, 2010:191) since we would contest the positioning of girls as relational ‘achievers’ to boys ‘underachievement’ (Jackson et al., 2010).

### ***Teaching pedagogies and gender equality in education***

Teachers’ attitudes and teaching pedagogies are commonly held to influence gender outcomes in schools (Arnot, 2006). Since the 1970s, teachers in a number of nations, including England, have been exhorted to encourage girls to think critically about the identities of women and this has led to the higher achievement of girls when compared with boys (*Ibid*). Nonetheless, since then, research has pointed out that teachers continue to see girls in idealistic terms whilst boys are viewed as problematic (Myhill and Jones, 2006: 111) and studies have shown that teachers do not appreciate the achievement of girls as the outcome of cleverness, but rather as a result of rote learning or hard work (Skelton and Francis, 2009: 96). As a consequence of this, some teachers have tended to give feedback to students in a way that has further marginalized girls (Gray and Leith, 2004: 14).

The debate about whether boys or girls gain more attention and are viewed with a more positive attitude by teachers has attracted considerable research which has tried to provide solutions to increase the fairness of teaching pedagogies in relation to gender achievement. These have included attention to gender awareness in all the processes of teaching including the language employed in classroom interaction (Woolfolk, Hughes, and Walkup, 2008: 212) or the use of flexible teaching pedagogies in order to meet the needs of boys and girls (Gipps, 1996a: 6). In particular, it is suggested that teachers should ensure that both boys and girls understand lesson content by giving them ample time to answer questions

(Gipps, 1996b: 265) and that teachers should build a rapport with students of both genders (Mlama et al., 2005; Johnson and Weber, 2011, Mitrevski and Treagust, 2011) since it is considered that this helps both learners and educators by providing feedback from students that will lead to appropriate expectations about the abilities of both boys and girls (Gipps, 1996b) and assists students to take a full part in learning activities through discussion and collaboration (Johnson and Weber, 2011: 153). Gender stereotypes in learning materials and in classroom organisation have also been key concerns leading to the recommendation for specific teaching pedagogies such as gender responsive pedagogy (Mlama et al., 2005), productive pedagogy (Keddie and Mills, 2007), boy-friendly teaching pedagogy, or critical pedagogy (Morgan, 2000).

### ***Gender and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes in Vietnam and England***

In Vietnam, the most common way to become a high school teacher is to undergo a four-year undergraduate course at a university of pedagogy. In such programmes, the ‘core’ curriculum and ‘soft’ curriculum are mandatory and are defined by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2013). Sadly, as in England, neither the core nor the peripheral curriculum of ITT programmes makes mention of gender equality issues. This situation is not unique to England and Vietnam and can also be seen in many ITT regimes such as those in the USA and Canada and the other constituent nations of the UK (Poole and Isaacs, 1993; Skelton, 2007, DeLuca, 2012). By contrast, some nations have chosen to include modules about gender equality in education in teacher education programmes (Aikman, Unterhalter and Challender, 2005: 53), whilst other nations have chosen to make a commitment to gender equality in the wider educational environment (DeLuca, 2012, Poole and Isaacs, 1993). In England, the two main traditional routes to becoming a teacher

were to gain the Postgraduate Certificate of Education in one year, or to pursue a four-year undergraduate programme that confers Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) such as the Bachelor of Education degree (Coffey and Delamont, 2000: 78). However, there has been a decline in the number of undergraduate programmes in recent years and an increasing transfer to school based programmes of training. Whichever route is chosen by those aspiring to teach, ITT includes basic areas of knowledge such as attention to the requirements of the national curriculum and promoting the good behaviour of students (Department for Education, 2013). Unfortunately, gender equality is not a priority in such programmes (Skelton, 2007: 679, Younger and Warrington, 2008: 432) which serves to confirm the disinterest of the government in this crucial area but can also be attributed to the lack of time available on such programmes (Skelton, 2007: 679) and to the dislocation between theory and practice (Younger and Warrington, 2008: 441).

## **Methods**

The research focus for this study was on the last stage of compulsory public education at high school level for students aged between 16 to 18 years in both Vietnam and England.

The research sought to:

- explore the effects of the government policy on gender equality;
- examine the attitudes of teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, and students to gender equality in High Schools; and,
- examine the role of the curriculum and pedagogy in promoting gender equality in education.

Qualitative methodologies can play a powerful role in advancing theory on education and on women and leadership (Ngunjiri, Chang and Hernandez, 2016). Since feminism is a social and collective identity that represents ‘a complex intersection of political and personal ideologies’ (Zucker and Bay Cheng, 2010: 571) it’s main focus for research if frequently consciousness about women’s shared and distinct experiences of disadvantage within a patriarchal society (Parry and Johnson, 2016: 27). The main research approach employed in the study was qualitative because of its utility in analysing complex ‘phenomena such as feelings, thought processes and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn through more conventional research methods’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11). The research design drew on and employed elements of narrative analysis (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004) and grounded theory, the latter of which is ‘congenial with other approaches such as feminist theory, narrative analysis...’ (Charmaz, 2006: 184). Within this approach, the main research tool was individual semi-structured interviews with staff and students.

The research sample was drawn from schools and a higher education institution in both Vietnam and England. The sampling approach was purposive in that it sought to facilitate examination of the aims of the study by focusing on schools of similar size, catering for the same age phase in the two nations under scrutiny that had close connections to Higher Education Institutions that focused on Teacher Education. In Vietnam, staff in two high schools and one university were interviewed. In order to ensure confidentiality the two high schools are anonymised in this text as Schools A and B. These were chosen because they were in different and contrasting geographical and social locations, and were of different sizes and characteristics which thus broadened the social and geographical basis of the study (Silverman, 2006). Both are deemed to be good high schools and offer both the standard curriculum and specialist classes and ordinary classes. School A is located in one

of most developed cities of Vietnam and is managed by the local pedagogic university and was thus where academic staff carried out educational research. At the time when data was collected School A had 743 students and 73 staff. In contrast, School B is located in a province of the central highlands of the country, which was the homeland of ethnic minority communities. The economy of this province is far less developed than that of school A and much of the economy remains agrarian in nature. Nonetheless, School B is similar in size and contains 1,016 students and 92 staff.

The sample consisted of the Headteachers and Deputy-Headteachers, and eight class teachers drawn from different subject areas, in each school, alongside 11 students in school A and 10 students in school B. The sample drawn from the university of pedagogy in Vietnam included the vice principal in charge of curriculum, the course leader for high school teacher education, and two lecturers in ITT. The sample in England sought to replicate that developed for the institutions in Vietnam but was smaller in size and included staff in one high school in an urban area in the North West of England and ITT staff from the School of Education of a university in the same region.

Interviews were recorded digitally then transcribed in full. The material was read, careful notes were made and initial codes were developed (Creswell, 2013), after which the process of analysis proceeded by ‘assigning codes to the main themes’ (Kumar, 2011: 278). Sub-themes were subsequently identified using an inductive approach and the interrelations between themes were examined which were then used to develop a series of narratives from the data. Axial coding was then undertaken in order to disaggregate core themes and to relate categories and concepts to each other through inductive and deductive thinking (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1998). Key themes that emerged in this process included attitudes to gender equality operant in schools and the wider society; the nature of teacher training; the gendered nature of the curriculum in schools; the importance of teaching

approaches in reinforcing or countering gender stereotyping; and, the ways in which greater gender equality might be achieved. Finally, the researchers integrated the themes into the text using interpretations adopted from narrative and grounded theory approaches (Kumar, 2011).

### **Data presentation**

In a society which places great emphasis on social cohesion and deference to authority it is of little surprise that all of the respondents in the High Schools in Vietnam stated without equivocation that they supported the Vietnamese government's commitment to gender equality in education and that they believed that education was paramount in securing greater equality in society as a whole. However, their responses also made it clear that their attitudes were complex and multifaceted and that many respondents held atavistic views in relation to gender. For instance, the Headteacher of School A noted that some female teachers continued to prefer to have sons to daughters whilst a male maths teacher in School B declared openly that he had daughters but he had always wished to have a son. In addition, there was a clear differentiation in the role expectations of men and women, even among university staff, and the idea that it was inappropriate, or even shameful, for men to do housework was prevalent. One male teacher stated:

*When I got married I felt I was ashamed to do housework. I felt it weird because my father did nothing. In my family, my mother did all things round the house, my father just wandered.* (Male lecturer of literature at pedagogic university)

Similarly, a male teacher in School B warned that struggling for gender equality would make women have more work to do with the clear implication that it was their role to manage the house and children. Counter-intuitively, within such a perspective, gender equality was perceived to worsen the situation of women since it would bring paid work in addition to housework and, for this reason, whilst all respondents supported gender equality in education, many responses revealed significant personal predilections against change in the status quo. Indeed, it was notable that most respondents tended to be conservative in their personal attitudes in this area. Since this perspective was operant it was clear that the support for gender equality was espoused rather than representative of a real determination to strive for equality.

Worryingly, such gender bias transcended the boundaries of generation since similar viewpoints also existed amongst students, as evidenced when a boy in School A stated that girls ‘just needed to be beautiful’ whilst several female students stated that their main life goal was to get married to men who occupied a better social positions than themselves. Inevitably, such responses revealed a level of gender stereotyping that must influence the nature of classroom interactions and both student and teacher expectations in terms of gender.

It also became clear that although all teaching staff in Vietnam affirmed that they and their colleagues treated students in an equal way, responses from students showed that teachers gave more attention to girls in social science classes and to boys in natural science classes and that both teachers and students displayed gendered attitudes about the perceived different abilities in learning in particular subjects. For instance, one female teacher believed that:

*..There are some subjects that girls are better at than boys but boys learn natural science subjects better... girls learn social subjects better. Natural science requires higher mentality and boys have better mentality. Social subjects ask for hard work... girls work hard... (Female middle leader female chemistry teacher at School B)*

A male teacher who had many years experience of teaching maths in school B declared that people saw women as a ‘minority’ regardless of the fact that they represented approximately half of the population. Moreover, respondents emphasized that good learning outcomes of girls were the result of hard work rather than their innate ability. Clearly, such attitudes impacted on the confidence of girls, as evidenced by a girl at School A, who stated that mathematics teachers behaved better towards boys than girls and that this was acceptable because *‘boys are better than girls’*. This confirmed both the low expectations of girls in learning in mathematics and that teachers tended to treat students differently in terms of gender and confirmed that there was evidence of the familiar phenomenon in developing nations that teachers tend to pay more attention to boys in ‘masculine subjects’, with a consequent effect on both the confidence and level of participation of girls (Aikman, Unterhalter and Challender, 2005: 47). The influence of such attitudes can only be heightened by the fact that, like most High Schools in Vietnam, both School A and School B had a preponderance of male teachers in science subjects.

The data from Vietnam revealed a divergence between an espoused commitment to gender equality and the enactment of such a policy in practice. Notably, whilst the staff in managerial positions espoused the national policy regarding gender equality in education, teachers did not acknowledge any such focus in practice. Most respondents claimed that the curriculum was equal in terms of gender. However, a male lecturer pointed out that there

was gender bias in literature textbooks. From his experience as a high school teacher then as a lecturer, he perceived that the images of Vietnamese women in learning materials were significantly different from those for men. He stated:

*I see the textbooks describing women as working hard, doing the housework very well... men are just holding guns and being at construction sites. Such descriptions deepen the gendered difference.* (Male lecturer of literature at a pedagogic university)

This was substantial evidence, which confirmed the work of Ngo (2007) that there is continuing gender bias in the textbooks for high school students in Vietnam, which tend to represent women in lowly or domestic roles where they appear dependent and oppressed. Interestingly, boys in both schools asserted that social subjects were difficult for them whilst girls claimed that natural subjects were difficult. This assertion revealed that the curriculum or the teaching pedagogies (or both) were problematic. Some staff stated that boys learned natural science subjects better than girls and vice versa. This accorded with the findings of Ma (2008: 454) which showed that teachers in many countries think that boys are more able than girls. Indeed, the gender stereotypes might have been so deeply embedded that it became naturalized as a reproduction of the status quo (Dillabough, 2004: 495) in students' minds.

In England, although it was acknowledged that much has been done in recent years to create a more equal educational system, some respondents suggested that many attitudes in the wider society remained archaic in a way that was not dissimilar to those operant in Vietnam. Notably, the Deputy-Headteacher in the study high school pointed out that whilst the school tried to maintain an approach that offered girls and boys equality of opportunity,

attitudes in the wider society, including those of some parents of students, were still problematic and affected the school:

*In the media, for instance, the imagery that the media uses to portray women as confectionary or as things are to be there for the gratification of people's less appealing appetites, that they're objects of ... of desire for men, I think that's something that needs to be addressed.*

*... even now, in most houses, women do most the work. They look after the kids. When men and women divorce it's not the men to have the children, it's the women. It's a man's world. This is a man's world.* (Male High School Deputy-Headteacher)

This was a revealing and perceptive analysis that accepted that much remained to be done socially and attitudinally both in schools and in the wider society in England. Furthermore, it was notable that although respondents from the school in England tended to see less overt gender bias than respondents in Vietnam, there was still evidence that girls and boys were viewed in different ways. For instance, one respondent stated:

*... I think girls are more organised, they are more willing to learn, they are more willing to do homework, they are more willing to put extra effort in but that's not generalized and say all boys don't but on the majority or, yeah, say probably. Even my own children my daughters work much harder than my son.* (Female Middle Leader)

A recently qualified teacher also stated that she believed that the better results in learning that girls gained in England were thanks to their hard work, whilst boys were lazy. She supposed that:

*I think the girls do...maybe they try harder and then therefore they seem to achieve more because they put more effort in. The boys can be a bit, you know, I don't know, lazy sometimes.* (Female recently qualified teacher)

Nonetheless, there was a strong feeling that schools in England had done much to address issues of gender. This was evidence in many of the responses from staff, one example of which was from the Assistant Head teacher, who stated that:

*I think that the school promotes very much equality in students in gender... But I think the school really enforces that everybody should be equal and have the same opportunities. So we here try to tell pupils everything, you know, it doesn't matter you are a boy or a girl, everybody's the same.*  
(Female Assistant Headteacher)

Many respondents declared that universities and schools should be central to the drive for gender equality in education, and, for example, a lecturer in the University stated that: '*I think university has a role in ensuring that people understand gender equality*' (Female University Lecturer). Indeed, overall, staff at both the university and the high school guaranteed gender equality in their institutions. They also confirmed the important role of the university and high school in promoting gender equality yet only two of them admitted that gender was an important issue and it should be a focus of education. Although four respondents indicated that gender equality was important, they believed that it was less of an issue than it used to be.

Respondents mentioned various benefits that gender equality in education could bring such as raising the aspirations of young people, having better social awareness and wider access to jobs or a fairer society. They also believed in equal education with improvement to students' achievements if gender equality was secured. Through their viewpoint, they revealed that equal opportunities were shifting when talking about gender equality.

With this in mind it is surprising and concerning that some staff at the university Teacher Training Department felt that there were no issues to address:

*... I think that really, for most pupils it's common sense really...So I don't really think that universities really need to address it as an issue because I would say that it's understood.* (Female Programme Leader)

Such comments made it clear that challenges remained in terms of ensuring that best practice in gender education was implemented in England as well as in Vietnam.

The respondents in the High School in England were also confident that the curriculum was equal in terms of gender with one respondent stating that '*...I think the policy on education and curriculum is very open and fair*'. This was a somewhat disconcerting statement that revealed a level of insouciance about gender in schools in England that was in contrast to a considerable body of research.

Low expectations of girls were not evident in any of the responses from English educators. However, different expectations in terms of learning approaches were revealed. For instance, one lecturer stated that:

*...boys like the challenge of an examination, they like the challenge of exams, they like final examinations, they like the sort of very quickly get to point of things and they like to do things, they are quite active. I think girls take longer sometimes and like to discuss and work around things. Girls tend to do multi tasking but boys do one task really well.* (Lecturer at the School of Education at a university in North West of England)

Although attributed to a commitment to different learning styles, such views could be perceived as gendered in ways that are not dissimilar to the attitudes revealed by Vietnamese respondents.

## **Discussion and recommendations**

The data revealed that despite the wholly commendable commitments to gender equality that have been made at the national and local level, Vietnamese educators remain subject to hegemonic cultural and historical attitudes which place girls at a disadvantage in schools, especially in certain areas of the curriculum which are considered to be solely an appropriate sphere of activity for boys. Correlatively, the data from England suggests that much has been achieved in addressing the imbalance in levels of achievement that existed prior to the 1970s but a danger exists that the recent focus on the underachievement of boys will distract and detract from the debate on gender and it is important that ‘advanced’ or ‘developed nations’ do not fall prey to the temptation to view themselves as locations of ‘genderless gender’, where mute or hidden gendering and sexualisation converge with the gender-neutral rhetoric which create a ‘myth of gender equality’ (Lahelma, 2012: 3). In doing so both theory and practice needs to focus on the ‘mundane materialities of classrooms’ since these ‘do crucial work in enacting gendered power’ making it vital to rethink classroom space as ‘an emergent intersection of multiple, mobile materialities’ as part of a ‘material feminist praxis’ (Taylor, 2013: 689).

In both nations, these deeply ingrained cultural attitudes are, according to Bourdieu, ‘taken for granted’ and, specifically in relation to schools, students own beliefs and attitudes about their self worth are constrained by such socially defined boundaries (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992: 199). Furthermore, in Bourdeian terms the doxa of attitudes to gender amongst educators ‘appears as self-evident’ (Bourdieu, 1972: 164) and defines the limits of what is

thinkable and sayable; indeed it defines the ‘universe of possible discourse’ (Bourdieu, 1972: 169) and for girls in Vietnam ‘defines the sense of ones place’ (Bourdieu, 1979: 549) within the school and wider society. In order to address these embedded issues it is clear that concerted action is required at a number of levels.

We noted earlier that the model by Unterhalter et al (2014) has indicated the need to create a virtuous circle of impact based on bringing different kinds of interventions together. Although our focus here is specific to high schools and the evidence suggests that a programme of action in Vietnam is required which will seek swiftly and systematically address the gender issues across the education system. Further, we argue that although the secondary education system in England has made significant strides in addressing many of the challenges it faces in relation to this crucial topic there remain a number actions that would be of benefit to both the systems of education in Vietnam and in England. Specifically in Vietnam these actions should include the following elements:

- The Vietnamese government should introduce more comprehensive, concrete and focused legislation regarding gender equality that addresses the issues in educational institutions, the workplace and wider society;
- The Ministry of Education and Training should undertake an urgent review of the curriculum to ensure that it is gender-neutral and requirements should be put in place to ensure that all learning materials are free from gender bias.
- Universities of pedagogy should create mandatory programmes in gender equality in education. Such programmes should include specific knowledge about gender equality in education including: the right of women in the law, the psychology of high school boys and girls and greater awareness about gender issues in the context

of Vietnam relating to the historical and geographical context (Aikman, Unterhalter and Challender, 2005: 47).

In both nations the following actions would be of benefit:

- School leaders need to reflect on their own attitudes to gender issues and they need to be encouraged to analyse the gendered nature of schooling and then act to address the issues which they note at the institutional level.
- Teachers and school leaders should be required to respect the differences between students since providing the same opportunities for students does not always mean seeing boys and girls as the same (Johnson and Weber, 2011: 153).
- Teachers should be trained, encouraged and required to develop strong and appropriate professional relationships with students since such a rapport would help students in seeking assistance in their learning (Mlama et al., 2005: 20; Mitrevski and Treagust, 2011: 39).
- All teachers should be enabled to gain awareness about the real and potential gender issues in all activities in school, such as the need for greater flexibility in teaching pedagogies, especially in approaches such as collaboration and discussion (Gipps, 1996b: 265), two way feedback, and the arrangement of classrooms (Mlama et al., 2005: 7).
- Serving teachers should be encouraged to undertake a programme of training in gender awareness and ITT institutions should assist schools in operating workshops where teachers can share their experience to implement ideas about gender issues and pedagogies (Aikman, Unterhalter and Challender, 2005: 53).

- Positive role models should be used to instil greater self-confidence in girls in order to encourage them to take a full and equal part in subjects that have previously been considered ‘masculine’ in nature.

These actions will ameliorate the problems that are faced by students in schools and they will have the greatest impact if undertaken in full and if such initiatives are fully integrated within a wider overall policy, as suggested by Unterhalter et al (*Ibid*). The ultimate aim, however, should be to amend attitudes in the wider society in both Vietnam and England. However, the experience of other nations suggests that there is a complex and symbiotic interaction between the development of positive attitudes and actions in the wider society and in schools.

## **Conclusion**

History is often embedded, explicitly or implicitly, in discourses on contemporary aspects of gender and education (Tinkler and Jackson, 2014: 70). This applies no less to England than Vietnam. However, England has enjoyed some considerable success in promoting gender equality in education in the last thirty years. Vietnamese society has made great strides since the 1970s but this study has revealed that the attitudes of many educators and students are still dominated by traditional cultural values that contribute to the subjugation of girls and women in society. Despite the dangers that can be associated with wholesale policy borrowing the Vietnamese government should seek to adopt some of the strategies that have been deployed in England and other nations that have sought to challenge the way that society is constructed in relation to gender roles. In order to create the step-change in attitudes that is needed a comprehensive programme is required that addresses all aspects of the educative experience of girls. Such actions in education need to be part of drive across the wider society of Vietnam for gender mainstreaming that will enable women to begin to

escape from the history that currently holds them in thrall so that they can gain greater self-fulfilment and contribute fully to the wider economy of this fast developing nation. Meanwhile, in England, a more complex conception of gender and education must emerge that will take account of the complex and shifting discourse on gender and the rapidly changing nature of societal values and attitudes.

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