

**THE IMPACTS OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY ON SCHOOL ORGANIZATION:
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY IN A PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL
IN VIETNAM**

by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that I have completed the submitted doctoral dissertation independently, without any unauthorized outside help and only with the help referred to in the thesis. All texts that have been quoted verbatim or by analogy from published writings and all details based on verbal information have been identified as such. In the analyses that I have conducted and to which I refer in this dissertation, I have followed the principles of good scientific practice, as stated in the Statute of Justus Liebig University Giessen for Ensuring Good Scientific Practice.

Deklaration

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Abstract

This qualitative grounded study aimed to generate a substantive theory of the impacts of school autonomy on a school in Vietnam. It concerned with how teachers and school leaders perceive the impacts of school autonomy on four aspects of a school, namely educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture. School autonomy was defined as authority and responsibility which provides the freedom of schools to make decisions within a determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities. It is presented in three domains of education, organization and personnel, and financial resource management. Data collection was conducted in a selected public self-financed school in Vietnam. The study employed observations of school activities and semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders as methods of collecting data, and the grounded theory approach of Corbin & Strauss (1990) as the method of data analysis.

The analysis of data revealed four themes: (a) school-based curriculum, (b) performance-based pay, (c) teachers, (d) school values. Research findings presented that school autonomy might be beneficiary to many aspects of a school. It increased school responsiveness to students' needs and improved teaching and learning practice at the classroom level. Regarding school structure, teachers enjoyed an extensive autonomy over professional matters which was much higher than their peers in other regular public schools. The school strongly decentralized freedom to teacher groups to make professional decisions. The autonomy and responsibility of lead teachers were also significantly enlarged. For teachers, changes resulting from school autonomy contributed to an increase in teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction. Key factors contributing to teacher job satisfaction were good pay, job security, recognition, meaningful work, and teacher collegiality. In terms of school culture, school autonomy shaped some positive

values towards students such as respecting student autonomy, putting students' benefits as the first priority, making every effort for students' success, and supporting low-performance students. School autonomy was also a favorable factor in promoting organizational learning and developing the school as a learning community. The school tended to encourage teacher diversity within a school community and emphasized the need of establishing school distinctive values to differentiate it from other public schools. It is worth noting that school autonomy could only bring these benefits when it was accompanied by the necessary supporting conditions such as the quality of teaching staff and school leader, a sufficient school budget, school cultural values, and the supports of students' parents.

However, school autonomy was harmful where it could exacerbate teaching and learning to the test in the context of a test-oriented education in Vietnam. School autonomy context was recognized as a main factor heightening tensions between the school and local governing bodies. School autonomy significantly increased the school principal's autonomy whereas school council, teachers, and parents contributed only a weak voice in most school-level decisions. With greater professional authority from decentralization, lead teachers might misuse their authority or treat teacher members unfairly. Further, when working in the context of school autonomy, the workload and work-related stress of teachers were markedly increased. Four sources of work-related stress of teachers were teachers' professional autonomy, school's requirements, administrative tasks, and maintaining harmonious relationships with students' parents. When enjoying higher autonomy, schools would be less competitive than other public schools because students had to pay higher tuition fees instead of being covered by state subsidy. Finally, the distinctive school features resulting from school autonomy were big obstacles for the school to find suitable school partners and maintain collaborative

relationships. Overall, this study contributed to the existing knowledge through the generation of a substantive theory of school autonomy and the formulation of recommendations for policy and school management practice.

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List of Abbreviations

BoET	District Bureau of Education and Training
BoF	District Bureau of Finance
BoHA	District Bureau of Home Affairs
DoET	Provincial Department of Education and Training
DoF	Provincial Department of Finance
DoHA	Provincial Department of Home Affairs
I	Interview
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training
O	Observation
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
UK	The United Kingdom
US	The United States of America

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

New Public Management reforms were initially introduced in OECD countries at the beginning of the 1980s and have been increasingly influential all over the world (Christensen, 2008; Hood, 1991). Being grounded in both economic and management theories, New Public Management calls for the adoption in the public sector of managerial and organizational forms used by private organizations (Lægreid, 2011). Its general aim is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public agencies, increase the responsiveness of public organizations to customers and clients, decrease public expenditure, and increase managerial accountability (Lægreid, 2011). From these original ideas, countries have been implementing New Public Management with different starting points, following different paths, going through different stages, and pursuing different goals (Lægreid, 2011).

Under the influence of the New Public Management reform wave, as in other public sectors, education has applied key concepts like marketization, privatization, decentralization, managerialism, performance measurement and accountability (Tolofari, 2005). From this, education decentralization has gradually emerged as a global phenomenon (Fullan & Watson, 1999; Karlsen, 2000; Maslowski, Scheerens, & Luyten, 2007) with many centralized education systems shifting to decentralized ones (Bjork, 2007; Caldwell, 2008; Helgøy, Homme, & Gewirtz, 2007; Hirtt, 2004; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008; Rönnberg, 2007). Educational decentralization refers to the transfer of authority and responsibility from higher to lower hierarchical levels (Abulencia, 2012; Hanson, 1998; Iftene, 2014; Karlsen, 2000) or between organizations at the same level (Hanson, 1998). Being in tension with centralization, decentralization represents the values of ‘freedom, differentiation, and responsiveness’ (Caldwell, 2005, p. 4; A. Davies

& Openings, 2011, p. 94). Recent studies of the OECD concluded that decentralized school systems perform better than centralized ones (OECD, 2007, 2013). Education decentralization is considered as a fundamental element of good governance and a solution for education quality improvement (Bjork, 2007; S. White, 2011).

Education decentralization generally involves four sources of authority, namely central government; provincial, state, or regional governments; municipal, county, or district governments; and schools (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). In this continuum from the center to the periphery (Brown, 1990; Galtung, 1974), schools are a primary unit of improvement (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). Therefore, the concept of school-based management is introduced in many school reforms (Caldwell, 2005; Fornari & Giancola, 2011) with reference to a systematic and consistent decentralization of authority and responsibility from higher levels to school level (Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibáñez, 2009; Robertson & Kwong, 1994) in order to better respond to students' needs and improve education outcomes (Heredia-Ortiz, 2007). The core idea of school-based management is that schools should enjoy autonomy in decision making on matters related to their functions and operations (Gargallo, 2013).

School autonomy is defined as freedom from the control and command of external actors in making decisions that relate to the success of school (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Being a complicated concept, school autonomy is generally described via the areas of autonomy, the actors or bodies in charge of decisions, and the degree of autonomy of these actors (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Scheerens & Maslowski, 2008). The scope of school autonomy covers broad areas of school management such as curriculum and assessment, personnel and physical resources, finance, and student policies (Bullock & Thomas, 1997). The loci of decision-making could include principals, teachers, school councils, or other education authorities (OECD, 2011). Four degrees of autonomy that

schools can enjoy are full autonomy, limited autonomy, discretionary delegation, and no autonomy (Eurydice, 2007). In association with the emergence of education decentralization, school autonomy initiatives were widely recognized in many education systems between the 1980s and 1990s (Bandur, 2012a). The most notable reforms were observed in the UK with grant maintained schools in 1988, New Zealand in 1988, US with charter schools in the 1990s, Sweden with the Friskola movement in 1992, and Australia with self-managing schools (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988; Sharpe, 1994). School autonomy has been also a prominent trend in other developed countries such as Italy, Hong Kong, Singapore, Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and German-speaking countries (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010; Caldwell & Spinks, 1988; Y. C. Cheng & Mok, 2007; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Ng & Chan, 2008; Thompson, Gereluk, & Kowch, 2016; Trimmer, 2013). Developing countries, which are typically characterized as practicing highly bureaucratic centralism (Lauglo, 1995), have been gradually adopting the concept of school autonomy with examples such as Indonesia, Cyprus, Philippines, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Abulencia, 2012; Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011; Theodorou & Pashiardis, 2015).

The education system of Vietnam has been described as strongly centralized (London, 2011) since it maintains a top-down governance structure with four levels from central government, provinces, districts, to schools (Love, 2005). State governance in education is greatly affected by the political leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (London, 2010). In the context of rapid socio-economic developments, the values of centralized, bureaucracy and subsidies are no longer suitable for the education system (D. Q. Nguyen & Sloper, 1995). Therefore, decentralization was identified as one of the fundamental strategies in education management reform (Cobbe, 2007; T. T. Tran, 2014). The concept of school autonomy for public secondary schools was first introduced

in the field of school finance and personnel (Central Government, 2002, 2006, 2015). According to current regulations, the schools with better management capacity and budget affordability enjoy the higher autonomy level. In terms of curriculum development and educational activities, the government has recently experimented with granting schools autonomy in curriculum development since the introduction of a new national curriculum program (MoET, 2018b). In short, although school autonomy has only recently emerged in Vietnam, it could become an essential trend of education reform in the coming years.

Statement of Problems

First of all, the introduction of school autonomy has led to a proliferation of studies that explore the link between school autonomy and student achievement over the last three decades. Most early studies in the 1990s found no definite link between school autonomy and student achievement (Dempster, 2000; Fullan & Watson, 1999; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998b, 1998a; Malen et al., 1990; Murphy & Beck, 1995). The synthesis review of Leithwood and Menzies (1998a) concluded that ‘There is virtually no firm, research-based evidence of either direct or indirect effects of school-based management on students. The evidence that does exist suggests that the effects on students are just as likely to be negative as positive’ (p. 235). Since 2000, there has been a growing trend toward using international survey data like Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), or International Civic and Citizenship Survey (ICCS) to analyze the impact of school autonomy on student achievement within country and in a cross-country context (Fuchs & Wößmann, 2007; Hanushek, Link, & Wößmann, 2013; B. Jensen, 2013; Paletta, 2014; Patrinos, Arcia, & Macdonald, 2015; Wößmann, 2007; Wößmann, Lüdemann, Schütz, & Wes, 2007; Yi, 2015). These studies share a conclusion that there is a positive relationship between a

higher level of school autonomy and a higher level of student achievement providing there is a balance of autonomy and accountability. Besides, school autonomy makes different impacts in developed and developing countries (Hanushek et al., 2013; Wößmann et al., 2007).

At the within-country level, a considerable post-2000 literature has grown up around the theme of comparing student achievement of schools enjoying a high level of autonomy and that of traditional public schools. With a relatively long history of charter schools, there has been a growing volume of studies in the US focusing on student achievement in charter schools and regular public schools at both district and cross-state level (Abdulkadiroglu, Angrist, Cohodes, Dynarski, Fullerton, Kane, & Pathak, 2009; Betts & Tang, 2008; Bifulco & Ladd 2004; Booker, Sass, Gill, & Zimmer, 2008; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, Dwoyer, & Silverberg, 2010; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009; Miron & Nelson, 2004; Raymond, 2009; Readon, 2009; Solmon & Goldschmidt, 2004; Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, & Witte, 2009). Similar studies can be found in the UK context where researchers are primarily concerned with comparing student achievement in academia and in public schools (Machin & Wilson, 2008). No consensus has yet been reached where the relationship between school autonomy and student achievement can be positive (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Booker et al., 2008; Dobbie & Fryer, 2009; Hoxby, 2005; Hoxby & Marurka 2009; Smyth 2011); negative (Betts & Tang, 2008; Bilfuco & Ladd, 2004; Solmon & Goldschmidt 2004; Zimmer & Booker 2009); or mixed (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Gleason et al., 2010; Miron & Nelson, 2000). The review of Suggett (2015) concluded that ‘There is no definitive or simple conclusion from assessing the impact of autonomy on student achievement, but neither does the evidence reject the contribution of autonomy’ (p. 1). These inconclusive research findings failed to generalize a cause-and-effect link between school autonomy and student

outcomes. Therefore, recent studies call for turning to how school autonomy changes factors that are likely to have an impact on student achievement (Caldwell, 2014; Suggett, 2015; Blazer 2010; B. Jensen, 2013; Maslowskii et al., 2007, Paletta, 2014). To respond to this emerging research trend, this study explores the impact of school autonomy on different aspects of a school in order to provide a better understanding of the black box between school autonomy and student achievement (Caldwell, 2014).

Second, most current studies focus on the impacts of school autonomy on one or several separate aspects of school practice such as school improvement (Keddie, 2015), school climate (Dellar, 1998), school health (Bandur, 2002), school effectiveness (Chin & Chuang, 2014), school leadership (Brauckmann & Schwarz, 2014; Karagiorgi & Nicolaidou, 2010; Pont et al., 2008), organizational structure and school culture (Powers, 2009), teacher empowerment (P. A. White, 1992), and teacher commitment (Bandur, 2002). A recent study of Altrichter et al. (2014) provided a comprehensive evidence on the influence of school autonomy on a wide variety of school dimensions such as services, values used for justifying development measures, work structures and internal organization, classroom teaching, and the relationship between school and external stakeholders. Very little is known about the way that one school exercises its autonomy in practice, the diverse impacts of school autonomy in a specific school as well as school staff's perceptions about those impacts. Thus, it is necessary to fill these gaps by undertaking an exploratory study like this present study.

Third, as school autonomy is a complex concept and could create various impacts in different settings, researchers heightened a need to explore school autonomy in different educational contexts and types of schools (Glatter, 2012; Wermke & Salokangas, 2015; Neeleman, 2018). From analyzing PISA data, Hanushek, Link, and Wößmann (2013) proved that school autonomy affects negatively in developing and low-

performing countries and positively in developed and high-performing countries. Currently, most studies have shed light on school autonomy in developed countries whereas its practice in developing countries is poorly illustrated. Hence, a study conducted in one developing country like Vietnam could contribute to highlight in more detail the complicated nature and diverse impacts of school autonomy.

Fourth, because school autonomy has recently been implemented in Vietnam, it will be necessary to investigate its impacts within a public school context. However, the volume of Vietnamese literature is minimal, because school autonomy has not gained the widespread interest of researchers and most studies are action research that explores practical measures for finance management (D. T. Nguyen, 2009; T. H. Pham, 2008) or staff management (B. Le, 2010; H. L. Nguyen, 2008). A notable study by T. M. L. Nguyen & Do (2012) focuses on evaluating the impact of school autonomy in finance on education quality in four selected schools. Therefore, this research is based on a proposition that although school autonomy in secondary education is not a priority of current policies (Central Government, 2012a; National Communist Party, 2013), it will become a prevailing trend of school reform in the coming years. Recent studies in Vietnam propose that public schools in the future should enjoy autonomy to meet the changing requirements of society (Dao, 2013; D. N. T. Pham, 2015; T. R. Vu & K. Tran, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to generate a theory of school autonomy to shape the initial theoretical foundation for the substantive area of school management in Vietnam.

Aim of the Research

This research aims to generate a substantive theory of the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of a school. The theory is grounded in field data that reflects the personal perspectives of school leaders and teachers in a specific school.

Statement of Purposes

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to investigate the impacts of school autonomy on different areas of a school. From the perspective of school as an organization (Everard, Morris, & Wilson, 2004), four interdependent elements of a school will be explored, namely educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture.

Research Questions

Given the above statement of purpose, this dissertation will address one core question: How does the staff in the selected school perceive the impact of school autonomy? This question will be addressed in four sub-research questions of how school autonomy impacts on educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture.

The Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions to knowledge. First, while very little is known about the impacts of school autonomy at the school level, the present study sheds light on how school autonomy makes changes to the educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture of one public secondary school. The study also provides school people's views about positive and negative, direct and indirect, visible and invisible changes that school autonomy brings to their school in general and to every teacher in particular. Findings from this study could advance understanding of the complex nature and diverse impacts of school autonomy at the school level.

Second, generating a substantive theory of school autonomy from field data could be a unique approach not before captured in the literature. As mentioned above, a large amount of current literature employs a quantitative approach to investigate the impacts of school autonomy on student performance or school aspects. As being one of the first

qualitative studies employing grounded theory methodology to investigate this topic, this research could deepen the knowledge of school autonomy and its impacts on various aspects of a school. The substantive theory from this study could set a base for future research to verify or to expand theory.

Third, since few studies have investigated school autonomy in a developing country context, this study could enrich existing international literature on the characteristics of school autonomy in a developing Asian country like Vietnam. Moreover, education in Vietnam has recently gained increased attention from international researchers since the country presented impressive average student performances in science, mathematics, and reading scores in recent PISA tests in 2012 and 2015 (OECD, 2015), which ‘strongly outperformed their predicted test scores based on levels of income’ (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2015, p. 57). Glewwe and Muralidharan (2015) suggested that experiences from Vietnam could be a source of reference for other developing countries. Hence, the latest reform trends in public secondary schools, which are introduced in this research, could provide international scholars with a closer view of contemporary education in Vietnam.

Last, being one of a few empirical studies in Vietnam concerned with school autonomy, this study deepens knowledge on the emerging issues of current education reform such as school-based curriculum development, teacher appraisal and remuneration, teacher professional development, and school culture development. As school autonomy has been a new practice in Vietnam, detailed descriptions and explanations in this study could inform macro-level implications for policymakers when formulating upcoming reform policies. Findings from this study could contribute to discussions surrounding the pros and cons of a public self-financed school model in Vietnam. For Vietnamese school leaders, teachers, and practitioners, the present research

offers profound insights into how a public self-financed school is managed and operated, how school autonomy changes the work of teachers, and how to adapt to those changes. Hence, schools could envisage scenarios that they might encounter in the coming years. Good practices from setting school strategies, establishing performance-based pay, developing school-based curriculum, building a school as a learning organization, and establishing the school and parent relationship could be useful references for other public schools in Vietnam.

Limitations

The study shows several limitations on research design. First, the study is limited to a single, purposefully selected school in Vietnam. Research findings and the substantive theory generated from this study pertain only to the selected case and cannot be generalized to other contexts. Second, the time of this study is limited to the period between 2013 and 2016; thus policies and practices are discussed only as they operated in this period. Third, this study is unable to include the views of students, parents, or other school stakeholders on evaluating the impacts of school autonomy. Forth, this study does not engage with the relationship between school autonomy and student performance at school or system level. Moreover, other macro educational issues are important but beyond the scope of this study, such as the impact of school autonomy on education access and equity, the privatization of public schooling, the impact of school autonomy on school choice, and the contraction of government funding.

Key Concepts

For this dissertation, the following concepts are delineated as follows:

Impact is used as denoting ‘...lasting or significant changes - positive or negative, intended or not - in people’s lives brought about by a given action or serious of actions’ (Roche, 1999, p. 21).

School autonomy is defined as the freedom of schools in making decisions within a determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities (Caldwell, 2013; Honingh & Urbanovic, 2013; Suggett, 2015). School autonomy could be viewed in three domains, namely the education domain (goals, methods, curricula, student evaluation procedures); organizational and personnel domain; and financial resources management domain (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997).

Educational processes, which are considered as the central element of a school, cover teaching and learning, and relevant academic activities such as student admission, student assessment, and curriculum development, textbook and educational content selection (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Gargallo, 2013; Pont et al., 2008).

School structure refers to the formal arrangement of roles, process, and relationship within a school. Specifically, school structure is concerned with: (i) the hierarchical levels or formal organization chart; (ii) the formal reporting mechanism or formal roles and authority; and (iii) the designation of systems for communicating, coordinating, and integrating (Härtel, Jujimoto, Strybosch, & Fitzpatrick, 2007).

Teachers are employees of public schools, called to public service and have the responsibility of preparing students for productive and satisfying lives (Smylie, Miller, & Westbrook, 2008).

School culture is defined as values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols which guides individual behavior and functioning at school (Härtel et al., 2007; Maslowski et al., 2007).

The Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 is this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 presents an extensive review of the literature regarding school autonomy. It discusses the theoretical concepts of school autonomy and then introduces

empirical research on the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of public schools. Chapter 3 provides contextual information relating to school autonomy in Vietnam, such as the national education system, public secondary education, teaching and learning, leadership, and school autonomy de jure and de facto. Chapter 4 presents and explains methodological issues relating to this study, with specific emphasis on the rationale for the qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology. The employment of methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, and measures to maintain ethical research standards are thoroughly discussed. Next, Chapter 5 presents research findings that resulted from data analysis. Four primary themes and their sub-categories that emerged from the data are: school-based curriculum, performance-based pay, teachers, and school values. Chapter 6 brings the findings together to answer the research question. It discusses the themes that emerged from this study with those represented in the previous literature. Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter. It presents a summary of the positive and negative impacts of school autonomy as well as necessary conditions influencing school autonomy. The conclusions are followed by the researcher's suggestions for policy and school management practice in Vietnam and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an extensive review of the literature regarding school autonomy. The chapter firstly provides a theoretical framework for school autonomy, including its definition, rationales, degrees, areas, and forms. The latter part of the chapter introduces empirical research on the impacts of school autonomy, specifically on four areas: educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture.

School Autonomy

A Delineation of School Autonomy

The concept of school autonomy may be easily confused with other umbrella terms such as decentralization and school-based management. Educational decentralization refers to the transfer of authority and responsibility from higher to lower hierarchical levels (Abulencia, 2012; Hanson, 1998; Iftene, 2014b; Karlsen, 2000) or between organizations at the same level (Hanson, 1998). In an administrative system, there are generally four authorities from the center to the periphery, namely central government; provincial, state, or regional governments; municipal, county, or district governments; and schools (McGinn & Welsh, 1999; Brown, 1990; Galtung, 1974). When power and responsibility are decentralized to lower levels in the continuum, one of these agencies will be in authority and have official power to make decisions in the decentralized area. However, Christ & Dobbins (2016) warned that decentralization does not necessarily result in actual decision-making autonomy. One means of education decentralization is school-based management, which refers to a systematic and consistent decentralization of authority and responsibilities from higher levels to school level (Mehralizadeh, Sepace, & Atashfeshan, 2006; Osorio et al., 2009; Robertson & Kwong,

1994). Therefore, this study maintains that school autonomy is a result gained from education decentralization in general and school-based management in particular (R. H. Heck, Brandon, & Wang, 2001). Although the concept of school autonomy and school-based management are not entirely homogenous, these terms are used interchangeably in this study (Abulencia, 2012; Contreas, 2015; Göksoy, 2014; Grauwe, 2005a; Sleegers & Wesselingh, 1995).

While there are a variety of definitions mentioned in literature and policy documents (Ainley & McKenzie, 2000), throughout this study school autonomy is defined as the freedom and authority of schools to make decisions within a determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities (Caldwell, 2013; Honingh & Urbanovic, 2013; Suggett, 2015). This definition is employed because it specifically focuses on two essential aspects of school autonomy. On the one hand, school autonomy refers to the freedom of schools to make decisions on matters of school strategies and operations (Carlos & Amsler, 1993; Y. C. Cheng, Ko, & T. T. H. Lee, 2016; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; B. Jensen, 2013; Lai-ngok, 2004; Patrinos et al., 2015; Węziak-białowolska & Isac, 2014). This meaning might attribute to its origin in Greek: ‘autonomous’ means ‘having its own laws’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2017). Accordingly, school is a self-managed organization in which can introduce its own regulations in managing and operating school activities (Neeleman, 2019).

However, school autonomy relates to not only school authority but also responsibilities in making decisions on school strategy and operation. International tests such as PISA and TALIS tend to use an index of school responsibilities as a definition of school autonomy. According to this view, one school is autonomous when school-level actors such as principals, teachers, non-teaching staff, and the school council have responsibilities for school tasks and these responsibilities are not shared with external

agents (Contreas, 2015; Dworkin, 2015; Eurydice, 2007; Xia, Gao, & Shen, 2017). This concept of school responsibility might also suggest another aspect of school autonomy as its capacity to exercise autonomy and fulfill responsibilities (Agasisti, Bonomi, & Sibiano, 2012; Gawlik, 2008; Gargallo, 2013; Helgøy et al. 2007; Lundquist, 1987; Rönnerberg, 2007; Wohlsteter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). In short, authority and responsibility are two inseparable elements of school autonomy (Caldwell, 2005, 2014; David, 1989; Göksoy, 2014; Pont et al., 2008).

Tied to responsibilities, school autonomy does not mean a complete freedom but it is always located within a centrally or locally determined framework of regulations and standards. ‘Autonomy’ can be distinguished from ‘independence’ since the latter implies a complete absence of external constraint to schools’ freedom to act (Wohlstetter, 1995). Therefore, the interpretation of school autonomy as ‘the power to govern without outside controls’ (Berdahl, 1990, p. 171) or ‘functioning without the control of others’ (Levacic, 2002, p. 187) seems to be inappropriate. This study does not contrast freedom with control, but they are linked concepts. ‘The interplay between control and autonomy is an inevitable and pervasive phenomenon’ (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 210). When enjoying autonomy, schools might be free from the control and imposition of external actors at some certain respects (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Newton & Costa, 2016; Wohlsteter et al., 1995). However, there is neither complete freedom nor full school autonomy in the public education system (Caldwell, 2014). ‘Autonomy cannot exist in a vacuum’ (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 210) because it is always exercised within central, regional, or local frameworks of policies, standards, curriculum, and accountability (Bracci, 2009; Caldwell, 2005, 2014, 2016; Caldwell & Spinks, 1988; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Erss, Kalmus, & Autio, 2016; Osorio et al., 2009; Toh, Hung, Chua, He, & Jamaludin, 2016; Wohlsteter et al., 1995). Hill and Bonan (1991) interpreted

school autonomy as a relative term by which not ‘all’ but ‘an increase in the number or importance’ (p. 16) of decisions were made by authority at the school level. Similarly, Węziak-białowolska & Isac (2014) suggested that school autonomy is just a ‘relative independence’ (p. 5) because even when a school is a self-managed organization, it must adopt laws, rules and regulations set by both the school itself and external bodies (Dworkin, 2015). Moreover, school authority is not determined by the school but decentralized from higher governing bodies to the school (Y. C. Cheng & Ko, 2016; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Eurydice, 2007; Göksoy, 2014; Keddle, 2015a; T. Nguyen & Pfleiderer, 2012; Whitty, 1997). Therefore, the degree of school autonomy always relates to the degree of state intervention (Hooge, 1995). Overall, there is not a complete school autonomy but freedom to act within the broader framework of regulations and standards. The following sections will further reveal different aspects of school autonomy in terms of its objectives, degrees, areas, and forms.

The Aims of School Autonomy

School autonomy is not an end in itself but is used as a means for different purposes (Caldwell, 2016; L. Davies, Harber, & Dzimadzi, 2003). This section discusses the main aims of school autonomy based on the theoretical arguments of Altrichter & Rürup (2010), Y. C. Cheng (1993), and Clausen, Winkler, & Maike (2007).

First, school autonomy is argued as a government strategy to increase the decentralization of the education system (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010; Y. C. Cheng, 1993). Under centralization, schools are strictly controlled by external authority via a top-down mechanism and standard procedures. However, education is a complex practice that is unsuitable to be produced and delivered efficiently in a centralized style (Y. C. Cheng, 1993; King & Guerra, 2005). In a changing environment, schools are heterogeneous in background, goals, practices, and students’ needs (Y. C. Cheng, 2000; Ng & Chan, 2008)

that might lead to different patterns of responses (Caldwell, 2005). A uniform policy imposed by bureaucratic hierarchies could be inappropriate with a variety of schools and constrain schools from creativity and responsiveness (Abulencia, 2012). Therefore, increasing school autonomy might overcome these shortcomings of centralization. This practice is named *an optimization model* (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010) and could be observed in some German-speaking countries (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010) or self-managing schools in Australia (Hamilton Associates, 2015).

Second, from a democratic point of view, school autonomy, which commonly links with institutional features such as community involvement or co-determination of the school board, is a prerequisite for gaining social participation and democracy in education (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010; Clausen et al., 2007). In this *participation model* (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010), empowering schools to have autonomy, indeed, amounts to the distribution of authority to all stakeholders in schools, including principals, professional actors, students, parents, and the local community. When schools enjoy autonomy, all stakeholders must share authority and responsibility for every school decision (Malen et al., 1990). This is not to imply that all parties will always act in harmony but that the authority rests within the school community under a system of self-made rules to ensure that decisions can be made. The participation model is presented via school autonomy reforms in Europe since the 1980s (Eurydice, 2007), in Queensland (Burke, 1992), and the school-based management movement in Latin America (Grauwe, 2005b). Christ and Dobbins (2016) found that social democratic parties in England, Germany, Italy, and Sweden generally support the participation model with aims to increase political participation and democracy.

Third, school autonomy might be an effective strategy for both state and school in terms of *economy* (Y. C. Cheng, 1993; Clausen et al., 2007). Decreasing the control of

external governance authority might lead to a reduction of the size and cost of maintaining the state governance system and then an increase in management efficiency (Caldwell, 2005). This purpose greatly influenced school autonomy reforms in the 1990s due to the flourishing of New Public Management (Eurydice, 2007). For schools, ‘the freer schools are from external control - the more autonomous, the less subject to bureaucratic constraint - the more likely they are to have effective organizations’ (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 187).

Fourth, historically, during the 19th century and throughout most of the 20th century, school autonomy was characterized in Europe as a strategy to gain teaching freedom (Eurydice, 2007). Most current school reforms employ school autonomy as a strategy to improve the quality of education, effectiveness and responsiveness of the school system (Eurydice, 2007; Osorio et al., 2009; Pont et al., 2008). This perspective might link to the principle of equifinality (Y. C. Cheng, 1993). In contrast to the traditional principle of standard structure that focuses on external control and central management, equifinality emphasizes flexibility in school management: ‘there should be many different ways to achieve policy goals’ (Y. C. Cheng, 1993, p. 9). Accordingly, when external agencies do not pay much attention to the process of carrying-out or ‘steer not row’ (Pollitt, 2000, p. 184), schools are able to be more flexible in devising school policies to achieve both school objectives and policy goals. Moreover, school autonomy relates to a transformation from ‘passive implementing system’ to a ‘self-managing system’ (Y. C. Cheng, 1993, p. 9). Traditionally, schools are considered as a tool of governing bodies to achieve educational goals and must passively comply with regulations and standards mandated from higher governance. In contrast, the concept of self-managing school assumes school to be an active and independent organization. Schools have local knowledge and are most informed of its needs and capacities (Y. C.

Cheng, 2000; Heredia-Ortiz, 2007; B. Jensen, 2013; Wößmann, 2003b) because principals, teachers, and educational staff are those who maintain closest day-to-day contact with students and know their students very well (Hill & Bonan, 1991). When a school is a primary unit of decision-making (David, 1989; Elmelegy, 2015; Karlsen, 2000; Malen et al., 1990; Osorio et al., 2009), it can formulate appropriate school-based policies to meet diverse expectations of target subjects and serve students better than when being passive to top-down commands (Bandur, 2012a; Y. C. Cheng, 1993; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; R. H. Heck et al., 2001; Heredia-Ortiz, 2007; Ng & Chan, 2008; Osorio et al., 2009). Furthermore, school autonomy might attribute to the ideology of human initiative (Y. C. Cheng, 1993). In a bureaucracy management, employees might work more in accordance with the precise structural system, well-defined goals, and central control. When there are problems, people tend to rely on external interventions rather than promote local initiatives. In contrast, school autonomy links to an interest in encouraging human creativity and professionalism of the school community (Caldwell, 2005). It fosters greater freedom and a sense of ownership in school management. Thus, school leaders and teachers are committed to experimenting with innovations and initiatives to deal with challenges and improve school outcomes (B. Jensen, 2013).

Last, school autonomy is an essential tool to increase school competitiveness and diverse school choice for parents and students. This *competition model* utilizes school autonomy as a tool to promote competition between schools and increase education choices for students (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010). This model reflects a market-oriented ideology that every school as a business operating in the market and parents have an exclusive right to choose schools for their children (Karlsen, 2000). Thus, school autonomy is a chance to differentiate themselves and compete with other schools to attract students. The competition between schools then generates momentum to raise

education quality and innovation (Buschor, 1998). Where schools charge fees, competition can drive down costs and improve efficiency, further benefiting the customers. The competition model can be founded at charter schools in the USA, free schools in Sweden, and the school autonomy movement in Ireland (Hamilton Associates, 2015; Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2015). Conservative parties in England, Germany, Italy, and Sweden are likely to adopt this competition model with specific objectives such as increasing school competition, school accountability, and efficiency (Christ & Dobbins, 2016).

In short, school autonomy is used in different settings for many purposes, such as realizing decentralization, encouraging stakeholder's participation in school management, increasing state management efficiency, improving education quality, stimulating competitions between schools, and giving parents more school choice (Smyth, 2011). While these goals are the theoretical objectives, the following sections of this chapter will discuss the implementation of school autonomy and its impacts in practice.

Three Parameters of School Autonomy

School autonomy is a 'multidimensional concept' (Gawlik, 2007, p. 526) and more complicated than it is often portrayed (B. Jensen, 2013). Researchers have made considerable efforts to highlight diverse dimensions of school autonomy. Y. C. Cheng et al. (2016) offer a reconceptualization that refers to functional, structural, and cultural autonomy. Functional autonomy means functional areas of daily school practice where schools have the authority to make decisions. Structural autonomy refers to the structural level at which schools have the authority to make decisions. Finally, cultural autonomy, which is a newly added element in the conceptual framework, is defined as 'the extent to which a school's internal cultural profile and operational characteristics are in line with the theory and culture of school-based management' (Y. C. Cheng et al., 2016, p. 184).

Grauwe (2005a) concerns with the two aspects of which decisions are transferred and who receives the authority. Other authors add that school autonomy should be explored in three dimensions namely: (i) loci and modes of autonomy; (ii) domains of autonomy; (iii) loci and modes of control (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Karsten & Melter, 1999; Levacic, 1995). The first facet presents whose autonomy and how it is being exercised; the second one relates to areas over which autonomy is being exercised, and the last one refers to who are the agents of control, and how is their agency exercised. Caldwell (2013) suggested an explanatory model with three dimensions on the extent of school autonomy, the extent of control over schools, and the outlook of a school or system. The combination of these three dimensions creates eight types of schools with different degrees of autonomy, control, and outlook.

This study supports the framework of Scheerens and his colleagues to highlight school autonomy from three facets: the areas of autonomy, the actors or bodies in charge of decisions, and the degree of autonomy of these actors (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Scheerens & Maslowski, 2008). This framework is utilized because it focuses on three crucial questions of what, who, and how in investigating school autonomy.

The areas of school autonomy.

The areas of school autonomy relate to the concept of ‘functional decentralization’ (Bray, 1994, p. 819) or ‘functional autonomy’ (Y. C. Cheng et al., 2016, p. 180). It refers to concrete domains of decision-making in which schools have the authority to operate. To illustrate these domains, most authors tend to list specific works in relation to which schools have and have not authority and responsibility. Extant literature shows that although authors may vary in categorization, they share consensus on the main areas of school autonomy, namely finance, human resources, and academic activities (Agasisti, Catalano, & Sibiano, 2013; Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003;

Bullock & Thomas, 1997; Caldwell, 2008, 2014, 2016; David, 1989; Eskeland & Filmer, 2002; Finnigan, 2007; Grauwe, 2005a; Hanushek et al., 2013; Keddie, 2015a; Maslowski et al., 2007; T. Nguyen & Pfleiderer, 2012; Patrinos et al., 2015; Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016; Salokangas & Chapman, 2014; Sluis, Reezigt, & Borghans, 2017; Solomou & Pashiardis, 2016; Winkler & Gershberg, 2000). Besides these three key sectors, some authors enlarge the scope of school autonomy to organizational issues such as school leadership, planning and structures, and school regulations (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Caldwell, 2008; Eskeland & Filmer, 2002; Nicolaidou Solomou & Pashiardis, 2016; Winkler & Gershberg, 2000) or autonomy in relations with students' parents (Eskeland & Filmer, 2002). It is worth noting that the areas of school autonomy might vary among different contexts depending on national or regional policies, historical features, and school settings (Y. C. Cheng et al., 2016). For this study, school autonomy covers three key domains (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997):

- The educational domain includes teaching and learning, student admission, assessment of student performance, curriculum development, and selecting or developing textbooks and educational materials.
- The organizational and personnel domain includes recruiting and firing teachers and school staff, determining employee's wages, teacher appraisal and promotion, and recruiting the principal (Grauwe, 2005b).
- The financial domain refers to planning, mobilizing, and allocating the school budget. Some authors suppose that autonomy in control of finance is the most vital factor of school management (R. H. Heck et al., 2001; Reezigt & Creemers, 2005)

The loci of decisions.

The second facet of school autonomy is the locus of decision taking. Being a complicated social system, a school is a collection of stakeholders in different roles, and in which one's scope for decision-making might affect the work of others (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015). Hence, the question on whose autonomy or in other words, the loci of decision making becomes a fundamental issue in the operation of school autonomy (Bergh, 2015; Wermke & Salokangas, 2015). Y. C. Cheng and Cheung (2003) maintained that school autonomy is presented via three levels of organizational level (autonomy of a school), collective level (autonomy of board of the school, a group of teachers), and individual level (principal autonomy, teacher autonomy). These diverse layers illustrate the feature of 'multi-level self-management' of school autonomy (Y. C. Cheng & Cheung, 2003; W. M. Cheung & Cheng, 1996). However, this study does not support the concept 'the autonomy of a school' in Y. C. Cheng and Cheung's framework because autonomy is not granted to the whole school, but must belong to specific actors or bodies in that school (B. Jensen, 2013). In another classification, decision making authority could be distributed to people within the boundary of schools, such as principals, school council, teachers, and groups of teachers or to separate, external people and/or organizations (Hindriks, Verschelde, Rayp, & Schoors, 2010). OECD (2011) classifies three levels of school autonomy according to the loci of decision-making as:

- School authority or full school autonomy: authority is given to only principal and/or teachers. This notion is supported by Hindriks et al. (2010) where these authors defined school autonomy as 'the operational empowerment of principals and teachers' (p. 1).

- Mixed authority or partial school autonomy: authority is given to the principal and/or teachers, and regional and/or national education authority or school council.
- External authority or no school autonomy: authority is given to only regional and/or national education governing bodies

According to the framework of OECD (2011), once authority is given to external bodies, it is unreasonable to label it as school autonomy. Therefore, in this study, the loci of decisions could be given to the principal, teachers or teacher groups, and the school council.

The degree of school autonomy.

The last facet of school autonomy is the degree of autonomy in decision-making at a particular domain. Most authors illustrate the degree of school autonomy via the extent that a school can freely make decisions. For instance, Caldwell (2008) suggested three levels of school autonomy are: (i) full autonomy at the level concerned, (ii) consultation with other bodies at that level, and (iii) independent but within a framework set by a higher authority or other. Gawlik (2007) displayed school autonomy by a continuum ranging from complete constraint to complete freedom. Similarly, Osorio et al. (2009) investigated school-based management practice in various countries and illustrated school autonomy via an autonomy continuum with five scales and specific criteria respectively, spanning from weak, moderate, somewhat strong, too strong, and very strong.

OECD (2003) reported that the degree of school autonomy depends on the governance model selected by the state. Schools could enjoy ‘substantive autonomy’ in the competitive market model since every school is an independent institution that competes with others for both students and funding. In the school empowerment model,

schools are still a part of the overall system and can act within a ‘devolved autonomy.’ In the local empowerment model of governance, schools can exercise a ‘consultative autonomy’. Finally, if the government applies the quality control model, the school can only enjoy a ‘guided autonomy’ with limited authority and significant dependence on higher governing bodies.

Y. C. Cheng (2011) described the degree of school autonomy in evolution over wave paradigms of school leadership. In the first paradigm, when school management is under external control by a bureaucracy, schools can only enjoy a limited autonomy. In the second paradigm, thanks to school-based management reform, schools are granted a bound autonomy under central monitoring, accountability framework, and external review. Last, in the third paradigm, schools may have sufficient autonomy to achieve their own goals regarding regional and international benchmarking in management and educational practice.

This study employs the categorization of Eurydice (2007) to guide the discussion. It should be noted that one school can adopt a mix of these degrees in different areas:

- Full autonomy: schools make decisions in conformity with laws and general regulatory framework in the field of education, without the control and/or intervention of external agencies.
- Limited autonomy: schools make decisions within a set of options predetermined by higher governance or seek approval for their decisions from governing bodies.
- Discretionary delegation: schools are delegated authority in certain areas, but this authority might be revocable.
- No autonomy: schools are not able to make decisions in a given area.

Furthermore, it is essential to distinguish school autonomy in *de jure* from in *de facto*. The former refers to the extent of school autonomy, which is legally regulated, whereas the latter concerns with the degree of actual autonomy in practice (Aoki, 2010). *De jure* autonomy is significantly essential since it sets a legally firm foundation for the scope of school autonomy. However, *de jure* autonomy might not necessarily lead to actual authority on the ground, which tends to be more significant (King & Ozler, 2005). Therefore, the term ‘autonomy gap’ is used to express the gap between these two concepts (Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007). The greater emphasis of this study is placed on *de facto* autonomy.

Contextualizing School Autonomy in International Practice

In international practice, increasing school autonomy has been a prominent trend in both developed and developing countries since the 1980s (Bandur, 2012a). Keddie (2015a) observes a movement in Western countries towards an increasingly decentralized education system over the 1980s and 1990s, notably charter schools and the autonomous public school system in the US and granted maintained schools in the UK. Other examples are independent schools in the Netherlands, school autonomy reform in Italy (Bracci, 2009; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014), the Friskola movement of Sweden (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015), the school-based management movement in New Zealand, self-managing schools (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988) and then independent public schools (Trimmer, 2013) in Australia, school-based management reform in Canada (Thompson et al., 2016), partly autonomous schools in Switzerland (Hangartner & Svaton, 2013), and autonomous schools in Ireland (Skerritt, 2019). In German-speaking countries, school autonomy has been a declared reform policy since the first half of the 1990s (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010).

Besides this, school autonomy has been a vital element of education reform in many Asian developed countries, for example the School Management Initiative in Hong Kong (Ng & Chan, 2008), specialist schools in Taiwan (Chin & Chuang, 2014), autonomous schools in Israel (Nir, David, Bogler, Inbar, & Zohar, 2016), independent schools and then autonomous schools in Singapore (Ng & Chan, 2008), and school autonomy reform in Japan (Kudomi, Hosogane, & Inui, 1999). At the same time, school autonomy has also increasingly become one prioritized policy in many other countries. Bandur (2012b) observes that the Indonesian government has increasingly transferred power and authority to the school level. Being inspired by the charter school system in the US, Qatar has begun to transform toward a government-supported independent school model (Cheema, 2015; Guarino & Tanner, 2012). Other examples of school autonomy reforms can be found in the Philippines (Abulencia, 2012), Cyprus (Theodorou & Pashiardis, 2015), Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Bruns et al., 2011).

Although the individual histories and characteristics of each of these schools extend beyond the scope of this study, in brief, school autonomy is a common strategy in many countries, and the introduction of school autonomy in public systems generally accompanies a specific school type (Suggett, 2015). The following section introduces key features of schools from the view of schools as organizations.

School Organization

Public schools are organizations of the public sector, funded from the public budget, and operated according to the expectations of state and society about education (Klein, 2013). There are several features which distinguish schools from other organizations (Greenfield, 1995). First, schools are uniquely moral institutions as the central moral obligation of schools and teachers is to contribute positively to the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development of students. They can also be

said to be political institutions as they prepare students to take their place in the existing socio-political order. Second, schools are the working place of a highly educated and permanent teaching workforce. As professional educators, teachers should enjoy relative autonomy in their daily work and a low interdependency to accomplish tasks. Third, schools are extremely open and vulnerable to their external environment (Greenfield, 1995). Teachers, students and their parents all have connections with the wider community which can bring social, economic and political influences to bear on school life. Like other organizations, schools might be threatened by regular or unpredictable changes from outside. Moreover, schools must often deal with conflicting goals of professional performance and community expectations while they have limited autonomy to decide how the school will be organized, whom the school will serve, or how to generate necessary resources. Therefore, the work context of schools is increasingly ambiguous and sometimes unpredictable (Greenfield, 1995).

The literature presents many approaches in investigating elements within-school organization. Kurt, Duyar, & Çalik (2012) emphasized three dimensions of individual, organization, and leadership in a school. Y. C. Cheng and Cheung (2003) argued that the profile of self-managing schools is formed at the individual level, group level, and organizational level. Dalin (2005) pointed out that the critical factors of a school are school surroundings, strategies, structure, relationships, and values. Based on the study of Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins (2011), Keddle (2014) offered a theoretical explanation of how schools approach and respond to school autonomy. This framework includes (i) situated factors like student intake, school history; (ii) professional factors like teacher values and school ethics; (iii) material factors like school staff, budget, and infrastructure; and (iv) external factors like pressures and expectations from local and national governing bodies. Keddle (2014) argued that contextual factors determine the position of a school,

and these factors will drive how the school takes up granted autonomy. Therefore, school autonomy can be experienced in different ways in different school settings (Caldwell, 2016; Keddle, 2014). In general, schools include personal and organizational strategy or goals, school people, formal and informal structures, school systems, activities of members, and school culture (Härtel et al., 2007; Kieser & Walgenbach, 2010; Stone, 2005). Every element 'makes different contributions to the overall operation of one school' (Barr & Dreeben, 2012, p. 136).

Throughout this study, the school organization includes four key elements, namely: educational processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture (Everard, Morris, & Wilson, 2004) because this concept covers the most critical elements of school organization. Moreover, this concept reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of these factors while not ignoring the goal diversity and the relative autonomy of individuals and groups within the school (Ball, 1987).

Educational Processes

Educational processes are considered as the central element of a school, including two main activities of curriculum development and teaching and learning (Amelsvoort & Scheerens, 1997; Gargallo, 2013; Pont et al., 2008). Curriculum development is defined as the planning, designing, implementation, evaluation, and documenting of teaching and learning episodes (Salkind, 2008). In the context of this study, school autonomy in curriculum development might relate to the concept of school-based curriculum development (Bezzina, 1989; Bolstad, 2004). Schools can create new curricular, adapting existing curricular, or adopting an existing curriculum (Bezzina, 1989). Bolstad (2004) argued that a centralized curriculum is too slow to respond to changing social and educational environment. Moreover, arguably, teachers know best about their students' needs and school resources. They should be not only transmitters of knowledge but also

curriculum developers. Therefore, the school-based curriculum is expected to meet the needs of students and the school, link school education to local resources and knowledge, and always update to changes and innovation in education. The school-based curriculum development involves the collaborative efforts of individual teachers, groups of teachers, and school administrators within an accepted framework (Bezzina, 1989). In this process, the principal plays as initiator while teachers play a dominant role (Bezzina, 1989; Hong & Youngs, 2016).

Teaching and learning is the core task of school organizations (B. L. Johnson & Owen, 2005). According to Sequeira (2012), teaching or instruction is a set of events that are occurring outside learners and are designed to support the internal process of learning. Learning is a change process occurring internal to learners to develop their knowledge, experience, and affectiveness. Based on the interactive education approach, McIlrath & Huitt (1995) provided an extensive review of models of teaching and learning proposed by Carroll (1963), Proctor (1984), Cruickshank (1985), Gage & Berliner (1992), and Huitt (1995). In general, teaching and learning include critical components such as student characteristics, teacher characteristics, teaching and learning climate, teaching and learning activities or classroom processes, and product or learning outcomes. In addition, teaching and learning in the 21st century need not only subject knowledge and pedagogical strategies but also technological components such as equipment, gadget, and tools (Dambudzo, 2015; McNeil, 2015). This study supports the framework of Sánchez & Ruiz (2008) on four critical components of teaching and learning. First, teaching and learning strategies are a set of procedures and rules for making the right decisions in each instructional situation (Sánchez & Ruiz, 2008). The decision making depends on teaching and learning objectives, teaching methods and techniques, and allowed times and resources. There are a wide variety of teaching methods such as lecture, inquiry-based

learning, discovery learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, resource-based learning, and computer-assisted learning (Westwood, 2008). Second, modalities are the general ways of organizing teaching and learning processes such as full-time, part-time, or online learning (Sánchez & Ruiz, 2008). Third, monitoring and supervising students' learning is the combination of systems and activities to track students' progress, providing necessary guidance and correcting errors, or supporting students overcome their obstacles and difficulties in learning in a timely manner. These supervisions can be individual and/or group tutorials, essay correction, or feedback on students' exercises and projects. Last, assessment, which involves both formative and summative forms, aims to evaluate students' performance and provide them with feedback and guidance for their learning improvement (Sánchez & Ruiz, 2008).

School Structure

School structure refers to the formal arrangement of roles, processes, and relationships within a school (Härtel et al., 2007). According to Everitt (2013), school structure might be characterized as structural looseness (Bidwell, 1965), a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976), or tightly coupled in some ways and loosely coupled in others (Rowan & Heinz-Dieter, 2006). This study argues that schools are bureaucracies because their structure is hierarchical, schooling activities are regulated by a set of rules and procedures, and school personnel works within a division of labor (Everitt, 2013; Gray & Summers, 2016; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). This concept is more compatible with the context of this study, where school management is characterized by a strong bureaucratic authority (*see Chapter 3*). Y. C. Cheng (1997) developed a framework for school structures, including three indicators of formalization, the hierarchy of authority, and teacher participation. Formalization is concerned with the level of school functioning being formalized with written policies and procedures. The hierarchy of authority refers

to the level of decision making being centralized in the school. Also, participation means the level of teachers being involved in planning and making school-level decisions.

This study supports the framework of Hoy and his colleagues in classifying the bureaucratic organizational structure of schools (Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). The formalization refers to the set of written rules, regulations, and procedures to manage school activities. The centralization refers to how school-level decisions are made and to what extent school people are involved in decision-making processes. Hoy further developed diverse aspects of these concepts. The formalization of a school can range from coercive to enabling along a continuum, which means the extent of restricting school people to comply with school rules. Coercive formalization tends to punish employees for their faults rather than reward them for their good performance. By contrast, enabling formalization encourages employees to find innovative and productive solutions to deal with problems in their work. Rules and procedures in the schools provide flexible guidelines to support good practice in the school community. Therefore, schools with enabling formalization ‘invite interactive dialogue, view problems as opportunities, foster trust, value differences, capitalize on and learn from mistakes, and delight in the unexpected’ (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). Similarly, the centralization of a school can be displayed in a continuum from hindering to enabling. Hindering centralization tends to be associated with top-down leadership styles, and teachers are actively controlled by their superiors and not encouraged to get involved in making school’s decisions. An enabling structure, in contrast, facilitates teachers’ participation in the decision-making process as well as empowering them in their professional role. In short, a school with enabling formalization and centralization will be less in conflict, more productive and collaborative, with a higher level of trust and commitment, and more professional autonomy (Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). In the context of this study,

these concepts of school structure might relate to teacher autonomy which means the teachers' freedom from authority or external constraint while doing their job at both pedagogical level and organizational level (Friedman, 1999; Ingersoll, 1996). At the pedagogical level, teachers can exercise autonomy in six areas: curriculum development, pedagogy, assessment, student behavior, classroom management, and professional development. At the organizational level, teacher autonomy refers to their participation in the decision-making process in school management (Friedman, 1999; Ingersoll, 1996).

School Teachers

People in a school may be considered as precious intellectual asset that drives the quality and performance of a school (Middlewood & Lumby, 1998; Snell & Bohlander, 2010), bringing the professionalism, knowledge, experience, skills, and attitudes of all principal, teachers, and non-teaching staff (Everard, Morris, & Wilson, 2004). This study mainly concentrates on teachers because they are the key working members in the schools (Y. C. Cheng & Cheung, 2003). Teachers are employees of public schools, called to public service and have the responsibility of preparing students for productive and satisfying lives (Smylie, Miller, & Westbrook, 2008). The work of teachers is very complicated as they must perform many roles (S. F. Heck & William, 1984). For students, the primary role of a teacher is to be the leader or facilitator of students' learning since teachers serve as resources of knowledge, norms, and attitudes. They are the implementers of programs and policies in classroom practice, and in some countries, they can even perform the role of curriculum developer. In some countries, teachers could be gatekeepers through whom students can gain access to social and professional services when facing social-emotional, physical, or psychological problems. For students' parents, teachers are an essential partner working together to promote student learning and development. In the school community, teachers play a significant role in collaborating

with colleagues for school improvement and contributing to teachers' professional development. In some school contexts, teachers can be granted leadership role in specific areas such as school governance, curriculum development, and teacher professional development. Last, teachers are lifelong learners, always learning new knowledge and skills to improve their work (S. F. Heck & William, 1984).

The work of teachers at the individual level in a school organization is generally presented via important indicators like job satisfaction, work motivation, and job commitment. Teachers' job satisfaction can be defined as the general attitude towards the job (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). It could be the perception of fulfillment derived from day-to-day work activities at schools (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Thanks to the feeling of this gain, teachers feel happy when working and willing to remain within the current school despite inducement to leave (Benson, 1983). As being one of the central topics in the field of organizational psychology and education, work motivation is often defined as energy or drive within the individual to initiate and determine work-related behaviors (Pinder, 1998). Last, there are three types of teachers' job commitment, including occupational commitment, commitment to students, and organizational commitment (Farrel & Buslt, 1981; Nir, 2002a; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Occupational commitment is characterized by teachers' belief in and acceptance of the teaching profession's goals and values, a willingness to dedicate to the profession, and a strong desire to continue working as a teacher. Teachers' commitment to students refers to their dedication in helping students learn to increase students' performance and wellbeing, regardless of their academic difficulties and struggles (Nir, 2002a). Organizational commitment refers to teachers' identification with and involvement in a particular school (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979).

School Culture

School culture relates to values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols which guide individual behavior and functioning at school (Härtel et al., 2007; Maslowski et al., 2007). It could significantly influence most aspects of the school from organizational level such as strategy development and school performance to individual level such as employee commitment, motivation and student learning (Peterson & Cosner, 2006). Researchers have identified a number of core elements of school culture. This study employs the view of Maslowski (2001) that school culture cover three layers of basic assumptions, values and norms, artifacts and practices. The basic assumption is the deepest and least tangible layer of school culture. It is a set of taken-for-granted beliefs that school members perceive to be true (Schein, 2016). These assumptions are generally concerned with five core issues such as the relationship between the school and its environment, the nature of reality and truth, the nature of human beings, the nature of human activities, and the nature of the human relationship (Schein, 2016). These assumptions are maintained unconsciously and are rarely presented in daily behavior until there is an external force that challenges them (Maslowski, 2001). In the second layer, school values refer to what school members believe is ‘good’, ‘right,’ and ‘desirable.’ It is viewed as a standard of desirability that school members expect and try to attain (Hofstede, 1980). In contrast, norms are unwritten rules on what is expected not to be done in school and what is unacceptable behavior. Values and norms are at a higher level of awareness in school practice. Last, the overt layer of school culture is artifacts and practices, which including a diverse variety of symbols, rites, rituals, ceremonies, myths, and stories that are visible and audible in school practice (Maslowski, 2001; Peterson & Cosner, 2006).

Empirical Research on the Impacts of School Autonomy

This section reviews empirical studies on the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of school organization. Three primary sources of research contexts are mentioned in this literature review: first, public schools that enjoy a higher level of autonomy than others such as charter schools, self-managing schools, independent public schools, free schools; second, education reforms which include a school autonomy component such as decentralization reform, school-based management reform, school-based budgeting; and third, internationally comparative studies relating to school autonomy. However, it should be noted that most of the literature consists of in-country studies with a diverse variety of institutional contexts between countries and within them. In addition, as every school is an organization with its own unique features of situational, professional, material, and external factors (Keddie, 2014), the impacts of school autonomy largely depend on the setting and the capacity of school (Caldwell, 2016). Therefore, it might be a complex task to discuss and compare research findings (Dumay & Dupriez, 2014). Furthermore, education reforms often do not contain only a school autonomy component but include other transformations; thus, it is challenging to seek out the specific impact of school autonomy (Scheerens & Maslowski, 2008). In short, the literature on the impact of school autonomy on schools should be reviewed and discussed with great caution.

Educational Processes

Extant literature shows mixed results on the impacts of school autonomy on the educational processes of public schools. First, public schools tend to utilize granted pedagogical autonomy to redesign and restructure their curriculum towards developing students' skills rather than academic knowledge. Although both charter schools and regular public schools in California (US) offer the same number of hours for core

subjects, the former spends more instructional hours in noncore subjects such as fine art, performing art, and foreign language, and less instructional hours in gifted programs or summer schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007; Zimmer et al., 2003). In Pennsylvania (US), charter schools introduce curricular innovations with a particular emphasis on ethnic and cultural elements to develop students' social and vocational skills (Miron & Nelson, 2000). In New Zealand, since transforming to self-managing schools, schools restructure their subject syllabus towards more emphasis on basic and social skills and local Maori language (Wylie, 1997). Similarly, academies in England utilized their autonomy to focus more on educational goals such as shaping students' social and moral ability and developing their critical and connected learning (Keddie, 2014). Some gymnasium schools in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) also use their pedagogical autonomy to focus on the social and personal development of students (Clausen et al., 2007). Second, the school-based curriculum allows schools and teachers to introduce innovative programs to meet the diverse needs of students (Bolstad, 2004). Schools can take up their autonomy to offer many innovative educational programs such as after-school tutoring, enrichment programs, weekend activities, extra-curricular activities (Hughes & Silva, 2013; P. A. White, 1992), individualized instructional plans for all students, packaged programs such as Success for All reading, Everyday Mathematics, or Discovery Works (Miron & Nelson, 2000), interdisciplinary subjects (Clausen et al., 2007; Wylie, 1997), and the use of parent contact (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012). Significantly, when developing these programs, students' needs are the most crucial factor to be taken into consideration (Wylie, 1997). School autonomy also allows schools to pay attention to the individual needs of students such as offering an Afrocentric curriculum and a program for hearing-impaired students (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012) or mainstreaming students for special education (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). In short, the school-based curriculum is

recognized as significantly improving education quality in terms of meeting students' needs (Bezzina, 1989).

However, pedagogical autonomy might lead to negative consequences to educational processes in certain situations. With autonomy, along with an audit culture and emphasis on performance, schools might turn their priority onto only key subjects that align with university admissions or state-defined examinations (Boyle & Charles, 2011; Clausen et al., 2007; Gobby, Keddle, & Blackmore, 2017; Keddle, 2015b; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). Although enjoying significant autonomy under a school-based management initiative, Hong Kong principals consider state-defined examinations as a decisive factor determining the future destiny of not only students but also their school (D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). Charter school members in the study of Ford & Ihrke (2017) are more likely to define their school accountability through high stakes-testing results. This 'teach-to-the-test' feature might devalue 'soft' subjects such as citizenship and religious education, social and health education (Keddle, 2014, 2017; Perry & McWilliam, 2007) and narrow school curriculum to only a few core subjects (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012). A study of 92 gymnasium schools in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) shows that schools that have a classical-humanistic tradition tend to exercise their autonomy in curriculum development to make emphasis on traditional academic subjects to pursue academic learning goals while methodological and psychological learning goals remains underestimated (Clausen et al., 2007). To address problems when making a transition from middle to high schools, charter schools in Pennsylvania (US) must extend learning hours and Saturday sessions. Instead of being a tool for assessing students' performance, standardized tests might turn into 'the 'raison d'être' of teaching and the benchmark by which a school lives or falls' (Boyle & Charles, 2011, p. 303). However, from analyzing country data in PISA testing, Wößmann and Fuchs concluded

that the benefit of school autonomy seems more visible when it is associated with an external standardized test (Fuchs & Wößmann, 2007; Wößmann, 2003a). In this case, an external standardized test is used as an accountability strategy and based on the philosophy of assessment for learning. It provides data on student performance, and schools might identify areas for improvement (Wohlstetter, 1995).

It is expected that granting school autonomy might lead to improvements in teaching and learning (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Elmelegy, 2015; Pont et al., 2008; Powers, 2009; Wohlstetter, 1995). Schools might utilize the freedom to realize innovations and changes in teaching and learning. In Hong Kong, teachers working in school-based management schools show more willingness and support for the paradigm shift in education, such as transforming from reproduced to individualized teaching and learning, and from site-bounded to localized and globalized teaching and learning (Y. C. Cheng & Mok, 2007). Charter school teachers in the study of Fryer (2012) revised teaching practice through the use of independent, project-based learning, and blended learning that promotes students' differentiation and dynamic. In New Zealand, many principals and teachers pointed out some positive benefits gained from self-managing school reforms such as the quality of student learning, teaching content, teaching style (Wylie, 1997). Teachers in independent public schools in Australia recognized that, as their schools enjoyed an extensive autonomy, they can apply teaching skills of evidence-based teaching, and their teaching changed to be more targeted, purposeful and considered (Hamilton Associates, 2015).

Grauwe (2005b) argued that school autonomy does not directly lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, but specific strategies associated with school autonomy might raise that quality. The most prevalent strategies are providing high dosage tutoring, focusing on high academic expectations, and using data-

driven instruction (Fryer, 2012). Data-driven instruction is a common strategy applied by high-performing charter schools in the US (Fryer, 2012), independent state-funded schools in England and Sweden (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012), and independent public schools in Australia (Hamilton Associates, 2015). These schools collect data for education improvement, for instance, monitoring students' progress, demonstrating school progress, identifying underperformance areas of teachers and students, and planning improvement strategies at both the classroom and school level. However, it should be noted that merely collecting student data does not make improvements; schools and teachers must analyze data and use it to guide teaching practice (Furgeson, Gill, Haimson, & Killewald, 2012). Another strategy is setting school missions that prioritize boosting student achievement (Gleason, 2017; Hamilton Associates, 2015). When leading independent public schools with a higher level of autonomy, principals also felt greater accountability, and thus, they made more considerable effort to improve student outcomes. Therefore, teachers are required to focus more on effective teaching and learning to support students' success (Hamilton Associates, 2015). A longitudinal study by Nir (2002b) in 28 schools in Israel showed that school-based management created a significant change in that teachers pay more attention to students' outcomes.

However, school autonomy does not always guarantee improvements in teaching and learning practices. Murphy & Beck (1995) warned that when gaining autonomy, schools might turn more attention to school governance issues than teaching and learning matters. From analyzing financial reports from 31 school-based management schools over four years, Nir (2007) found that schools increased their expenditures on building maintenance whereas the budget for educational activities such as instructional materials and the initiation of new programs, were slightly reduced. It seems that financial autonomy does not contribute to higher investment in education as was expected (Nir,

2007). In school-based management reform in Honduras, although PROHECO schools have more resources and better infrastructure than traditional public schools, there is no remarkable difference in pedagogical methods (Gropello, 2006). In the survey of Y. C. Cheng & Mok (2007) in Hong Kong, school autonomy did not link to classroom changes such as practicing a student-centered approach or facilitating students' learning, self-reflection or assessment. In the same vein, although school management initiative reforms in Hong Kong increased teachers' professional empowerment and motivation, there was minimal evidence of the effects on teaching and learning at the classroom level (Dimmock & Walker, 1998).

School Structure

Most empirical studies in a school autonomy setting pay special attention to centralization aspect, which means how school-level decisions are made and to what extent school people are involved in the decision-making process. Researchers might have different classifications of school structures in schools with high autonomy. Beck & Murphy (1998) proposed three pure models of structure depending on the loci of authority, namely the administrative model, professional model, and community model. This study employs the concept of Leithwood & Menzies (1998a) and Mehralizadeh et al. (2006), which includes four types of school structure:

- Principal-directed site-based management model or administrative-control model: the school principals play a decisive role in decision-making while teachers, parents, and the community are consulted in certain areas.
- School-based committee model or professional-control model: school professionals such as teachers and principals enjoy collective authority in making decisions.

- Parent committee model or community-control model: central or regional authorities might retain control over certain domains and delegate some functions to a council. Representatives of the local community and parents are involved in a school council and make decisions regarding strategies and practices of the school.
- Collegial, participatory, democratic management model or balanced-control model: a school council, which is generally chaired by the principal and involves all school stakeholders.

This classification presents that school autonomy does not always increase participation of school members because schools might adopt one model or a mixture of these models (Osorio et al., 2009). The following sections review changes in school structure resulting from school autonomy. It analyzes the authority, responsibilities, and relationship of three key actors, namely the school council, principal, and teachers.

School council.

The introduction of school autonomy is generally accompanied by the establishment of a school board or school council, especially in school reforms with a participation goal (Abadzi, 2013; Akinola & Awolowo, 2009; Bandur & Gamage, 2014; Caldwell, 1992; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; Gobby, 2016; Ho, 2006; Hughes & Silva, 2013). Representative members of school councils might be a very diverse group, including such people as the school principal, teachers, administrative staff, students, parents, and community members (Akinola & Awolowo, 2009; Ho, 2006; Hughes & Silva, 2013). School councils can function as an advisory body for school principals in making decisions, a key decision-maker, or a supervisory body to school administration.

Researchers have put forward different pros and cons of the school council model. Proponents raise the argument that school councils could lead to improved decision

quality, balance actors' benefits and expectations, increase democratic participation in school management, and promote school accountability. A highly functioning school council is essential to the operation and performance of autonomous schools (Hughes & Silva, 2013). Akinola & Awolowo (2009) used the system theory to explain the role of the school council. As schools are considered as subsystems of the community system, they must interact with other subsystems in a community, and the participation of parents and community members in the school council aims to increase interaction between subsystems. School councils are an effective mechanism to foster the relationship between schools and the local community (Elmelegy, 2015). From the school leadership point of view, Bush (2016) explained that because increasing autonomy goes generally along with additional tasks as well as responsibilities to the school, one school leader is not able to take over alone but a group of actors is required. In addition, the school council favors the notion of distributed leadership, which encourages the involvement of many actors in school management, rather than centralizing leadership limited to one decision-maker only (Bush, 2016; Elmelegy, 2015). Through operating a school council, a wide variety of viewpoints and solutions will be taken into account, and thus, all stakeholders can contribute to arriving at more informed decisions (Akinola & Awolowo, 2009). Furthermore, the operation of the school council might reduce the interference of higher governing bodies, which happens with the traditional bureaucratic model, because it is more difficult to influence the thinking of multiple groups (Gamage, 2003).

However, researchers warned of some negative impacts of the school council in the school autonomy context. In charter schools, school councils might become sources of instability and disruption to school management (Hill & Lake, 2007). There are many challenges to establishing and sustaining high-quality school councils such as recruiting qualified members, providing training and development for council members, setting a

structure for decision-making, and dealing with tensions among council members (National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance, 2008). Notably, in developing countries, the work of the school councils might be detrimental when council members lack expertise and experience to make informed decisions, or parents hesitate from school participation for cultural reasons (Abadzi, 2013; Skerritt, 2019).

The literature presents a diverse mixture of results in the operation of school councils. In California (US), Zimmer & Buddin (2007) found that parental involvement in school governance and budgetary decisions on charter schools' boards is considerably higher than it is in traditional public schools. However, from reviewing studies on school-based management, Beck & Murphy (1998) concluded that participatory decision-making did not contribute to improving the quality of decisions relating to school goals, teacher professional development, or staff management. A study by Bandur & Gamage (2014) in Indonesia, which employed a survey to school stakeholders of 42 schools followed by 42 interviews, reflected that not all stakeholders were empowered in all areas of school management. For instance, most stakeholders were empowered in many areas of school management, such as school missions, school plans, school infrastructure, school finance, and teaching and learning. However, school principal selection, teacher recruitment, curriculum development, and textbook selection are empowered to key school council members only. In charter schools in Pennsylvania (US), parents, teachers, and students have many opportunities to be involved in making school decisions, such as getting involved in school strategic planning, contributing input via surveys and interviews, and attending to important school meetings (Miron & Nelson, 2004). However, there was a gap between the opportunity to involve in school decision making and the actual influence on final decisions. Council members only had a real influence on areas like disciplinary policies, dress codes, school budget, school facilities, and personnel searches.

The structure of academies in England, where school boards are appointed rather than elected, can limit the involvement of parents, teachers, support staff, and the local community in making critical school decisions (Wilkins, 2012). Therefore, a necessary condition for the success of school councils is a real empowerment to council members, training and development for council members, active support from school principals (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007), and clarifying clear areas of authorities and responsibilities of council members (E. M. Walker, 2002).

Principals.

Principals and their leadership skills are considered as a decisive factor for the success of schools in generally and autonomous schools in particularly (Bush, 2011, 2016; Caldwell, 2016; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; Collins, 2002; Hamilton Associates, 2015; S. G. Huber, 2004; Keddle, 2015b, 2015a, 2017; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). ‘School autonomy reform reflects a sense of confidence and trust in school leaders and this can make a positive difference to their schools and the broader system’ (Keddle, 2017, p. 378). Two prominent themes that emerged from the literature are the authority and responsibilities of school principals and their decision-making styles when schools enjoy a higher level of autonomy.

It should be noted that the principal autonomy in an autonomous school scenario largely depends on the selected model of school structure, namely administrative control, professional control, community control, or balanced control. In the administrative control model like the case of the Netherlands, for instance, as school autonomy was not associated with a shared decision making, parental participation is unremarkable whereas principals play a decisive role in making most school decisions (Karsten & Melter, 1999). Another similar case is found in Austria where school-based management has been implemented; schools maintain a flat hierarchical structure that focuses on the role of one

school leader (Schley & Schratz, 2011). However, even in the other two models where principals are not key decision-makers, they still play an essential role in school management. For example, the principal leadership style and his or her interpersonal relationships with staff have a significant influence on teachers' participation in making school decisions (J. D. Chapman, 1988). Where principals actively encourage teachers' participation and acknowledge their contributions, the school council might be expected to arrive at more informed decisions. In contrast, if school leaders maintain their authoritarian approach and are unwilling to share their powers, participatory decision making cannot work correctly (J. D. Chapman, 1988).

The literature shows different results on principal autonomy when working in the school autonomy context. Overall, most studies recognize that school autonomy often associates with greater autonomy and more decision-making flexibility for school leaders (Arcia & Belli, 1999; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; N. Cranston, 2002). Compared with principals working in traditional public schools, those in autonomous schools generally have higher autonomy in school management (Gawlik, 2008; Gershberg, 1999; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). Principal leadership becomes increasingly complicated when they must maintain the traditional role as an educational leader on the one hand while attempting the role of school manager in finance, human resources, and accountability requirements on the other hand (Allen, 2009; Ball, 2003; Burger, Nadirova, Brandon, Garneau, & Gonnet, 2011; Cranston, 2002). Responding to this situation, some school leaders might feel overwhelming with paper work and have no room for creativity and flexibility, whereas others can take this opportunity to make efficiency gains and create new school income sources (Gobby, 2013). Furthermore, enjoying high autonomy might help principals increase their influence on school practice. For independent public school principals in

Western Australia, when being empowered, they became more action-oriented and felt more confident when making hard decisions (Hamilton Associates, 2015).

However, enjoying higher autonomy does not mean that principals are entirely free to make decisions as their work is constrained by many barriers and actors (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Bush, 2016; Glatter, Mulford, & Shuttleworth, 2003; Higham & Earley, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). The term ‘constrained autonomy’ (Bush, 2016, p. 4) refers to the situation when the principal is still under much control and constraints from national requirements, local authority, and school accountability. For example, a recent phenomenological study of Cetinkaya (2016) reports that principals of small charter schools in the US have limited autonomy since most main spending must get approval from the school committee. Moreover, all school finance activities like expenditure, revenues, checks, and balances, are kept under the surveillance of the school committee (Cetinkaya, 2016). Adamowski et al. (2007) admitted that principals must face a real ‘autonomy gap,’ which derives from policy frameworks and collective bargaining agreements. Similarly, principals in Finland, despite enjoying extensive freedom in school management, feel restricted by local economic guidelines (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). In the case of Austria, although there has been a shift toward school-based innovation and more decentralization, principal autonomy is limited by many regulations in most areas (Schley & Schratz, 2011).

Much research in recent years has focused on the authority problems of principals when working in the school autonomy context. First, the dilemma of accountability arises when many stakeholders, especially in community control or balanced control models, can be involved in the decision-making process, whereas principals might be mainly accountable for the success or failure of decisions made by or with others (Wildy, Forster, Loudon, & Wallace, 2004). Second, the dilemma of autonomy arises when principals are

expected to act autonomously as traditional school leaders, whereas there is a call for shared decision-making with other actors (Wildy et al., 2004). Third, the dilemma of responsibility arises when principals' granted autonomy is not related, lower or higher, to their responsibilities (Astiz, 2006; Chiome & Paul, 2011; Oplatka, 2010). Oplatka (2010) and Astiz (2006) reported that although many tasks have been decentralized to the school level, principals do not enjoy expanded authority. A similar practice is found in Zimbabwe where school leaders reported that they did not have sufficient autonomy to deal with tasks and responsibilities (Chiome & Paul, 2011). In Lithuania, in contrast, principals do not take responsibility for matters in which they have authority because there is a lack of strict managerial surveillance and leadership experience (Honingh & Urbanovic, 2013). And forth, researchers concluded that merely granting full autonomy for schools does not ensure that principals are able to effectively utilize it in management practice (Steinberg & Cox, 2016). When public school principals in Philadelphia were granted full autonomy in most areas of school management, they spent the most time on curriculum and instructional leadership while ignoring other areas like teacher professional development, school budget, and school disciplinary policies (Steinberg & Cox, 2016).

Another topic relating to the authority of principals in the school autonomy context is their decision-making style. Most literature shows that when schools enjoy a higher level of autonomy with expanded expectations and responsibilities, school principals tend to shift from the top-down style to a more shared and distributed leadership (Bandur & Gamage, 2014; Gamage, 2003; Gamage & Zajda, 2005; Lintner, 2008). In the case of self-governing schools in the UK, school autonomy does not lead to a top-down but a more participatory decision making style where principals are willing to listen to their subordinates' suggestions and discuss solutions (Bell, Halpin, & Neil,

1996). Although school-based management brought several disadvantages for school leadership, principals support participatory decision-making rather than the dictatorial leadership that existed previously (Cranston, 2002; Wylie, 1997). As an exception, school-based management in Israel has not been found to change the decision-making style nor traditional patterns of principals (Nir, 2002b).

Teachers.

Whereas teaching and learning is one ultimate goal of most school autonomy reform, teacher autonomy does not always get attention. The literature of teacher autonomy in the context of school autonomy has been inconsistent. Most research findings indicate that charter school teachers enjoy more autonomy in their classroom context but less autonomy in school-level decisions (Bomotti, Ginsberg, & Cobb, 1999; Ingersoll, 1996; Marks & Louis, 1999; Miron & Nelson, 2004), whereas the study of Ni (2012) shows a contrasting result. Regarding the classroom level, there are mixed results on the level of teacher autonomy in different contexts. Although there is a gap between expected and actual experience, most charter school teachers in Pennsylvania (US) agree that they enjoy extensive freedom in their classroom (Miron & Nelson, 2004). When comparing the perceived autonomy of teachers in charter schools with those in traditional public schools from survey data of the US Department of Education, Oberfield (2016) observed that the former enjoy more significant autonomy in the classroom such as choosing textbooks and learning content but have less control of homework. Both groups enjoy an equal degree of autonomy over technique, grading, and discipline. Powers (2009) found that charter school teachers have considerable autonomy over selecting instructional material and learning content, techniques, and discipline whereas teachers in both charter and public schools have the same level of control over grading and homework. Similarly, in Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) where

decentralize high curriculum autonomy to secondary schools, teachers report that they can approach the curriculum in a relaxed way and have the freedom to choose instructional methods, materials, and pedagogy (Berger et al., 2012). However, Keddle (2017) argued that school autonomy does not necessarily guarantee an increase of professional autonomy for teachers. In addition, there is a gap between teachers' *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy with the latter not really increased. This situation can be explained by the fact that teacher autonomy is under the rigorous scrutiny of internal and external actors such as school boards (Bomotti et al., 1999; Gershberg, 1999) and district authorities (Gawlik, 2007) or they must be held accountable for student outcomes in standardized tests (Crawford, 2001).

At the school level, it is argued that teachers in autonomous schools should be more involved in the school decision-making process (Ni, 2012; Yau & A. L. F. Cheng, 2011). A large number of studies show that teachers in the school autonomy context enjoy more autonomy than their peers in traditional public schools (W. H. Clune & White, 1988; Ronald G Corwin & Flaherty, 1995; Gawlik, 2007; Gaziel, 2006; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Nelson, 2000, 2004; Ni, 2012; Oberfield, 2016; Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011; Torres, 2014; P. A. White, 1992). More concretely, teachers can contribute their voice to school management issues and important school decisions such as school budget, equipment purchase, curriculum development, and hiring and firing personnel. Moreover, from investigating teachers in Tel Aviv (Israel), Gaziel (2006) found that teachers in school-based management schools not only feel more empowered in participating in school decisions but also have the feeling of self-efficacy and influencing school management.

However, a higher level of school autonomy does not automatically mean a higher level of teacher autonomy in school management. Teacher participation in Israeli schools

remains unchanged after the introduction of school-based management (Nir, 2002a). Teachers feel less empowered and less influential in school affairs under school autonomy reform (Arcia & Belli, 1999; King et al., 2001). In Hong Kong, although the school-based management initiative grants extensive autonomy to schools, teachers are not the key-drivers of school decisions, and their participation is not as active as expected (Ho, 2006). The study of Bomotti et al. (1999) generates a surprisingly different result to most previous literature concluding that traditional school teachers have significantly higher empowerment than the charter school teachers. Because the primary goal of school-based management reform in the Netherland is better control education funding, teacher participation is not a priority in this process (Karsten, 1998). In a comparative study of Desurmont, Forsthuber, & Oberheidt (2008), teachers in European countries reported that they have relatively little voice in determining the content of compulsory curriculum since this area is under the responsibility of national or local authorities or school principals. From synthesizing literature on school-based management, Murphy & Beck (1995) indicated four constraints to teacher empowerment at the school level. First, teacher participation comes at a high price in terms of time. Their increasing workload does not give them enough time to be involved in school council work and contribute to the school decision-making process (Brandao, 1995; Miron & Nelson, 2000). Participating in school works might distract teachers away from teaching duties and increase tiredness and stress (J. D. Chapman, 1988). Second, teacher empowerment tends to decrease both in the amount and intensity over time. Third, teachers' voices and participation are not always associated with a real influence on final decisions. For instance, although half of charter school teachers report that they have chances to be involved in school-level decision making, there is a big gap between expectation and experience in teacher empowerment and the degree to which they are able to influence

school direction and strategy (Miron & Nelson, 2000). Last, participation might be exercised by only a small group of teachers, whereas the others are excluded.

School Teachers

Concerning school teachers, four dominant topics that emerged from literature are teachers' workload, teachers' remuneration, job commitment, job satisfaction, and turn over. Firstly, the majority of the literature points out that teachers working in a school autonomy context have a more significant workload than their peers in regular public schools. For example, from reviewing 83 studies on school-based management, Leithwood & Menzies (1998b) concluded that heavier workload is the most frequently mentioned adverse effect. Charter school teachers in the US have higher workloads than their colleagues in traditional public schools since the former experience longer working hours per week, for instance 60-80 hours per week (Roch & Sai, 2017), with many intensive tasks in both in-role and extra-role performance (Duyar, Ras, & Pearson, 2015; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Oberfield, 2016). Since the implementation of the school-based curriculum under curriculum reform in Hong Kong, teachers reported that they experienced an increased workload then before (T. T. H. Lee, Y. C. Cheng, & Ko, 2017). Several justifications are suggested for this practice. First, because schools with higher autonomy have flexibility in hiring and firing personnel as well as offering longer instructional hours, teachers must accept to work longer and harder to secure their positions (Ball, 2003; Torres, 2014). For instance, charter school principals in the study of Cannata & Engel (2012) explained that they prefer hiring employees who are willing to take on extra tasks. Second, when schools are self-financed, the context of budget reduction and resource scarcity has imposed increasing pressure on the work of teachers (Mehralizadeh et al., 2006). Third, in European countries, traditionally, teachers enjoy relatively high autonomy in pedagogy, such as choosing teaching methods and selecting

textbooks. When schools are granted more autonomy, teachers have more opportunities to involve more in school management, and thus, their responsibilities and workloads have been expanded (Desurmont et al., 2008). Next, in the case of school-based management schools in El Salvador, due to an increase of parent and community participation, teachers must spend more time meeting with parents and other related tasks than teachers in traditional public schools (Sawada & Ragatz, 2005).

It is commonly assumed that when schools enjoy autonomy, teachers can get rid of bureaucratic tension imposed from higher governing bodies (Beck & Murphy, 1998; Bottani & Favre, 2001). One recent quantitative study by Oberfield (2016) shows that teachers in public charter schools have slightly lower paperwork than colleagues in traditional public schools. Teachers in independent public schools in Australia indicated that thanks to school formalization, there is less bureaucracy and red tape, and they feel comfortable and have more energy for teaching duties (Hamilton Associates, 2015). However, a number of studies show that teachers in autonomous schools generally experience increased workload and higher pressure from bureaucratic responsibilities than their peers in public schools (S. M. C. Cheung & Kan, 2009; Ronald G Corwin & Flaherty, 1995; Gropello, 2006; Nir, 2002b, 2002a; Wylie, 1997). Since the introduction of school-based management, teachers feel an increased bureaucratic workload (Nir, 2002b). Teachers in self-managing schools in New Zealand must fulfill more administrative and accountability works than before (Wylie, 1997). ‘Teachers may feel that they are crossing the lines into administrative roles without compensation for increased responsibilities’ (Brandao, 1995, pp. 26–27). Next, the expansion of teacher empowerment in autonomous schools might become a form of ‘managerialism’ where teachers are required to fulfill additional tasks outside instructional duties (Hartley, 2010; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; P. A. White, 1992). This situation might link to the fact that

most autonomous schools are not entirely out of a general legislative and regulatory framework on the one hand and under a higher level of accountability on the other hand (Ball, 2003; Fitzgerald, Youngs, & Grootenboer, 2003). Thus, teachers have to ‘struggle over visibility’ (Ball, 2003, p. 220) and perform more bureaucratic work. Moreover, some autonomous schools apply a performance management system that could be a source of tension for teachers (Fitzgerald et al., 2003).

Secondly, in respect of teacher remuneration, although experiencing a heavier workload, teachers working in schools with higher autonomy do not always receive higher pay. Recent studies on working conditions of charter school teachers report that they earn remarkably lower than their colleagues in traditional public schools, even after accounting for differences in levels of working experience and qualifications (Addonizio, Kearney, & Gawlik, 2015; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Nelson, 2000). By reviewing previous studies and conducting case studies, Malloy & Wohlstetter (2003) found that teachers’ salary in charter schools in many states is similar to or lower than that in public schools. A recent survey by Addonizio et al. (2015) reflects that both starting and experienced teachers working in charter schools gain a lower average salary than colleagues in traditional public schools. The Nicaraguan decentralization reform is associated with teachers’ financial difficulties, which might increase out-of-class paid tutorials (Fuller & Rivarola, 1998).

Thirdly, when working in schools with higher school autonomy, teachers generally have higher organizational commitment. Studies in the charter school setting show a high teacher commitment to school mission when this is one of the most important factors influencing their job decision (Cannata & Penaloza, 2012). The case study of Malloy & Wohlstetter (2003) proved that charter school teachers were attracted to these schools because of schools’ missions and visions. They show strong support for

charter schools, in which can apply their curriculum based on school philosophy.

Teachers working in independent public schools in Australia report that they feel more connected to school strategy and mission and believe more in the power of education in making changes to students' futures (Hamilton Associates, 2015). Similarly, charter school teachers have a strong commitment to the school mission, which glues teacher collegiality (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003). When school autonomy goes along with increasing involvement of teachers in school decisions, it could increase teacher commitment and motivation (Gamage, 2003; Gaziel, 1998; Santibañez, 2006), teachers' self-esteem and the sense of school ownership (P. A. White, 1992). Studies in Israel schools also support the strong positive correlation between school-based management and teacher commitment (Gaziel, 2006; Nir, 2002a).

Fourthly, the literature on teachers' job satisfaction in the context of school autonomy presents different findings. On the one hand, many studies suggest that school autonomy generally contributes to an increased degree of job satisfaction (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Renzulli et al., 2011; B. R. White, 2016). Teachers are satisfied with professional lives in charter schools when they can enjoy working, have greater autonomy to make decisions over school matters, a higher degree of collegiality and collaborative relationships (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; B. R. White, 2016). Other factors might be school physical facilities and resources available for instruction and educational activities (Miron & Nelson, 2000), useful support from administrators and colleagues (B. R. White, 2016), and a positive school climate (Powers, 2009). However, some studies find that charter school teachers are less satisfied with their jobs than their peers in traditional public schools (Cannata & Penaloza, 2012; Roch & Sai, 2017). In the study by Miron & Nelson (2000), the number of charter school teachers satisfied with their job is equal to the number of those who are unsatisfied. When exploring teachers in both charter schools

and traditional public schools, Wei, Patel, & Young (2014) found no difference in overall satisfaction between school types.

Last, a high turnover rate of teachers working in the school autonomy context is a prominent theme in the literature. High turnover is especially prevalent in charter schools through both attrition and school-to-school mobility (Cetinkaya, 2016; Miron & Applegate, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Stuit & Smith, 2012). Since the implementation of self-managing schools in New Zealand, the turnover rate is increased, both to new positions and to new careers (Wylie, 1997). In school-based management schools in Guatemala, the turnover rate is much higher than that of traditional schools (Gropello & Marshall, 2005). The primary reason is the lower job security in autonomous schools than that in regular public schools. For instance, dissatisfaction with salary and benefits or the sense of insecurity about the future is the main reason for the leave charter school teachers (Miron & Nelson, 2000; Roch & Sai, 2017; Stuit & Smith, 2012). In addition, charter school teachers are less likely to hold tenure positions or union membership because most charter schools implement at-will employment contracts rather than tenure system or collective bargaining agreements (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Ni, 2012; Renzulli et al., 2011; Roch & Sai, 2017; Stuit & Smith, 2012). Heavy workload and long working hours in charter schools are also important reasons for leaving (S. M. Johnson & Landman, 2000; Miron & Applegate, 2007). In the study by Stuit & Smith (2012), although actual working conditions in charter schools and traditional public schools are not mostly different, teachers' dissatisfaction with workplace conditions in charter schools is cited as the most crucial reason for their leaving. If schools enjoy high autonomy in personnel recruitment, but limited autonomy in personnel dismissals, teachers might feel unsatisfied and be disheartened when their schools are not able to sack under-performing teachers (Miron & Applegate, 2007).

School Culture

Most literature on school culture in the context of school autonomy mainly highlights the practices and values of schools whereas basic assumptions, which are the deepest layer of culture, are hardly investigated. Three main topics mentioned in studies are internal and external school relationships, school innovation, and schools as learning organizations.

School relationships.

Principal-teacher relationships. In most studies, school autonomy is conducive to a healthy relationship between principals and teachers. Teachers in the study of Hamilton Associates (2015) reported that since transforming to independent public schools, their principal had increased authority, and so they place more trust in their principal. The study concludes that building trust between principal and teacher is an essential pre-requisite of successful independent public schools. In self-managing schools in New Zealand, teachers have good access to information relating to their work and are involved in the school-decision making process or are listened to by decision-makers. Therefore, the relationships between the board of trustees, principal, and teachers are described as very positive and excellent (Wylie, 1997).

Many researchers have discussed factors contributing to a robust principal-teacher relationship. Valente (1999) found that school autonomy improves the principal-teacher relationship only when there is real teacher empowerment. In the same vein, from reviewing successful school-based management schools. Briggs & Wohlstetter (2003) concluded that the crucial element is leadership shared among school leaders and teachers, in which the former plays as manager and change agent while the latter is empowered to play a critical role in professional matters. Next, to build trust and confidence in school-based management, principals must encourage effective

communication by giving a fair chance for teachers to contribute their opinions (Gamage, 2003; Miron & Nelson, 2000). As an example of this, school autonomy in Argentina did not improve the collaboration between school leaders and their subordinates since two sides rarely share ideas about professional matters (Astiz, 2006). Another factor contributing to the support of teachers to their leaders in charter schools is that leaders must set a good example by working hard themselves (Miron & Nelson, 2000). Particularly in the initial stages of school-based management reform, charismatic features of school leaders are also favorable elements to attract their followers (Vally & Daud, 2015).

However, school-based management might be a challenge to the principal-teacher relationship when it changes from a traditional top-down decision-making regime to a more participative one (Cross & Reitzug, 1996). This practice requires principals to change their approach and behaviors towards their subordinates. Mayer, LeChasseur, Anyisia, & Kimberly (2013) developed a matrix of principal leadership typologies in relation to teachers and districts in autonomous schools. The qualitative data shows that most principals perceive themselves as catalysts, which means setting innovative visions and interpreting given policies to teachers. In contrast, the role as developers, which increases teacher leadership in school and improves school culture, is much more challenging to them. In several cases, principals perceive themselves as mediators of compromise to gain more autonomy from governing bodies (Mayer et al., 2013). In many studies on school autonomy, principals are described as chief executive officers (N. Cranston, 2002; N. C. Cranston, 1999; Gamage, 2003; Gobby, 2013; Ng & Chan, 2008; Ng Pak Tee, 2003; Smyth, 2011; Yau & Cheng, 2011; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). This means that instead of being one authoritative source of school management, principals become one amongst many representatives of school actors who share authority to make

decisions. This practice can be found in self-governing schools in some states of Australia. Because of the increasing participation of other actors in school decision making, principals no longer play a dominating figure who issues instructions and expects staff's unquestioned obedience. Therefore, they altered their role to provide input for school policies and persuade other council members to reach a final decision (Gamage & Zajda, 2005). Gamage (2003) described principals and teachers in self-managing schools as not being superiors and subordinates, but all of them followers of school missions that they are committed to realizing.

Teacher-teacher relationship. Teacher collegiality within a school can make significant contributions to school capacity in serving students effectively (Rosenholtz, 1989). The literature shows mixed results on the impacts of school autonomy on the teacher-teacher relationships. If school autonomy accompanies the professional-control model, which grants principal authority to teachers, it can increase trust and bonding among teachers because they must actively collaborate to make school decisions (Brandao, 1995). Many studies show that school autonomy is a suitable environment for teachers to enhance collegial spirit since school autonomy encourages teacher participation in school activities. For instance, school-based curriculum development is not only an excellent opportunity for teachers' professional development and their sense of professionalism (Keiny, 1993; P. A. White, 1992) but also increases teacher collaboration (Bezzina, 1989; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; B. R. White, 2016). In many studies on working conditions of charter school teachers in the US, collaboration with colleague is one key reason for choosing charter schools, because they can work with like-mind colleagues who are passionate about educational reforms and share innovative school visions (Cannata & Penaloza, 2012; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Applegate, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2000). For independent public schools in Western

Australia, teacher collaboration is primarily promoted as a strategy to improve teaching and learning practice (Hamilton Associates, 2015). The study explores that while public schools mainly strengthen teacher collaboration to deal with administrative matters, independent public schools also focus on pedagogical matters such as applying teaching and learning strategies, teacher observation and feedback and teacher professional development.

In contrast, other studies find no difference between teacher collegiality in charter schools and traditional public ones (Ni, 2012; Wei et al., 2014). Moreover, there is clear evidence indicating that teacher-teacher relationships might be weakened in school autonomy scenarios. School-based management and teacher empowerment might be a source of organizational conflicts and negatively change the school climate because when teachers are empowered, they become more critical of school matters (Short & Rinehart, 1992). The study of Astiz (2006) shows that teachers are almost alone in their work and do not share much pedagogical talk with their colleagues but share mostly administrative complaints. A weak in-school collaboration might be derived from the unplanned process of education reform and a loose structure between administrative and academic sectors (Astiz, 2006). In the context of school-based management in Israel, teacher morale, which refers to a collective sense of friendliness between teachers, is high in the year before the beginning, and the first year of school-based management, but significantly decreases from the second years (Nir, 2002a). This situation might be attributed to a high demand for accountability and for students' outcomes that gradually fatigue teachers, and greater competition among teachers for resources.

School-to-school collaboration. Although researchers have not treated school-to-school collaboration in the context of school autonomy in much detail, findings in this topic are very significant. School autonomy provides an opportunity for schools to

cooperate with others and establish collaborative school networks (Hamilton Associates, 2015). Despite enjoying a greater extent of school autonomy, school principals in the study of Gobby (2013b) did not break with or marginalize other public schools but built collaborative relationships with them to improve education quality and obtain a shared vision for the local community. When investigating cooperation between autonomous schools in England, Busher & Hodgkinson (1996) found three types of inter-school networking focusing on curriculum and staff development, organizational/administrative structures, and policy-making and political matters. Collaborations aim to improve education quality, make schools more responsive to students' needs, and discuss school structure problems. The success of these collaborative networks largely depends on personal relationships between members, especially school leaders. A study of the OECD (2013) reports a positive result that school autonomy does not ruin school-to-school relationship and collaboration is employed as a supplementary strategy to promote greater empowerment and school innovations. The study reviews an extensive literature on good practices of school cooperation in a school autonomy context such as administrative resources sharing, professional exchange, and cooperation network between high performing and low performing schools. Fruitful collaborations must be only based on the voluntary commitment of members and never on being imposed from above (Pont et al., 2008).

However, school autonomy might increase school isolation and threaten school-to-school collaboration. School autonomy itself does not raise barriers to school collaboration but accompanying elements such as school choice and school accountability. The most radical challenge to the collaborative network of autonomous schools in England is that school leaders are concerned with the benefit to their school rather than the broader needs of the local community because their urgent needs is to

recruit students and maintain budget (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996). Similarly, when school autonomy was employed as a strategy for school choice, most charter schools in Alberta (Canada) found that they had to increase their unique identity to attract specific groups of potential students. These features warn of a situation of self-focus and isolation that ruins school-to-school collaboration (Thompson et al., 2016). Furthermore, when autonomous schools are put under an audit culture with fiercely competitive accountability, school collaboration is not a priority for them (Keddie, 2014).

Innovations.

The evidence presented in the literature highlights the the fact that the most prominent value of schools with high autonomy is innovation. The term *innovation* refers to something newly created (Hellström, 2004) or significantly improved (Lubienski, 2009) rather than an adaption of something already existing (Neeleman, 2019). Highly autonomous schools are likely to encourage innovation to achieve school visions. From reviewing charter schools in the US, free schools in Sweden, and academies in England, C. Chapman & Salokangas (2012) observed that school autonomy allows schools to realize many administrative innovations such as merit-based pay, non-credentialed teacher hiring and contracting for services. In the same vein, autonomy is a good condition for schools to realize innovations such as attempting new governance or changing education practice (Dillon, 2011; Miron & Nelson, 2000). Moreover, the value of innovation has nurtured other positive values, such as innovation encouragement and determination. For instance, teachers in charter schools in Alberta (Canada) do not try to avoid risk, but welcome changes and accept risks as a regular part of innovation (Thompson et al., 2016). In the study of P. A. White (1992), teachers in autonomous schools are encouraged to share innovative ideas without any barriers like fear of being penalized for failure. Independent state-funded schools tend to promote a can-do culture

that raises student and teacher aspirations to improve performance (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012).

The literature emphasizes the decisive role of leaders in promoting innovations in the school autonomy context. School autonomy might expand the scope and potential for principals to take reasonable risks which are thoroughly calculated based on expertise, experience, and data (Hamilton Associates, 2015). Most importantly, principals must have confidence and determination that they can make meaningful changes. If they are not well rid of a bureaucratic framework and mindset, school autonomy does not make any sense to school innovation (Reeve, Hamm, & Nix, 2003). Moreover, since a high school autonomy is generally associated with increased control and surveillance from many actors, the way that school leaders respond to both opportunity and challenge is a crucial point. In the case study of Gobby (2013), independent public school principals in Western Australia have different reactions to extensive autonomy and constant monitoring from external actors. While some took this opportunity to make efficiency gains and create new income sources for their schools, others felt overwhelmed with paper work and had no room for creativity and flexibility.

Many studies discuss the influence of governing bodies on school innovation in the context of school autonomy. In most cases, regulatory requirements and governance control from governing bodies are recognized as significant barriers to realizing school innovation (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; Wilson, 2013). Since school autonomy diminishes the role of governing bodies to school decision making (Boyask, 2018; Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996), schools could enjoy greater freedom to realize innovative ideas. However, in the context of school autonomy, the literature calls for a change in the role of governing bodies from control and command to support and advice for autonomous schools.

Collaborative learning.

A review of the literature reveals that one shared value of most public schools in the school autonomy context is a collaborative learning culture. Collaborative learning, which is a form of teacher professional development, refers to the behaviors and practices that teachers work with and learn from others collaboratively and learn together as a team to continuously promote their learning capacity (E. C. K. Cheng, 2017). When investigating critical elements of successful school-based management schools, Briggs & Wohlstetter (2003) found that these schools created a robust professional learning community and developed a shared knowledge base. Similarly, one factor contributing to the success of autonomous schools is special attention to creating professional development opportunities (C. Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Fryer, 2012; Wohlstetter, 1995). Charter schools in the US, for example, spend considerably more time on developing teaching professionals than non-charter schools. According to Y. C. Cheng & Cheung (2003), the success of school-based management schools depends on the involvement of school members in continuous self-management and self-learning cycles. Besides this, coaching and increased feedback from administrators are essential factors for teachers' professional development in the school autonomy context (Fryer, 2012; Gleason, 2017). A synthesizing study on school reforms in the US from 1990 to 1995 found that site-based management can improve student learning only when school leaders and teachers establish a professional learning community and change instructional practice towards improving students' learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In other words, collaborative learning and teacher professional learning must aim at the ultimate goal of students' learning. This idea is supported by Briggs & Wohlstetter (2003) that professional development activities must consider students' needs and fit with the school reform plan.

The literature on teachers' professional development in the school autonomy context particularly emphasizes the role of school leaders (E. C. K. Cheng, 2017; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). School leaders play dual roles when they inspire and cultivate collaborative learning activities on the one hand, and lead the formulation of continuous professional development policy on the other hand (E. C. K. Cheng, 2017). For the first role, principals can act as co-learners with teachers in a professional learning community or a role model of lifelong learning. For the second role, they can create school structures, policies, and routines that facilitate regular collegial interaction and support both formal and informal learning in the school. E. C. K. Cheng (2017) concluded that the first role, which nurtures a collaborative learning culture, is essential because teachers' professional competencies could be naturally developed under a collaborative learning culture. Moreover, principal leadership style in particular contexts might influence the development of human capital in schools (D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a delineation of school autonomy. School autonomy is defined as the freedom and authority of schools in making decisions within a determined framework of goals, policies, standards, and accountabilities. School autonomy is a multidimensional concept when it relates to three facets, namely the domains of decision-making, the loci of decisions, and the degree of autonomy in decision-making. The chapter also discussed the crucial aspects of school organizations such as education processes, school structure, school teachers, and school culture. Theoretically, school autonomy is not an end in itself, but a means for obtaining different goals such as decentralization, school participation, education quality, school competition and choice, and state management efficiency. However, when implementing school autonomy in practice, empirical studies suggest that school autonomy could result in many positive

and negative impacts on schools. This literature review has shown that there is a scarcity of research on the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of one school.

Therefore, the main research question of this dissertation were drawn from this literature review: How does the staff in one school perceive the impact of school autonomy on their school? The next chapter attempts to frame the context of school autonomy in Vietnam, particularly teaching and learning and school management.

CHAPTER 3. THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN VIETNAM

Introduction

Vietnam is located in South East Asia, with a total area of 329,569 square kilometers (Nations Encyclopedia, 2018) and a population of 95 million (World Bank, 2018). Before 1986, Vietnam operated a centrally planned administration in which the central government played a decisive role in all aspects of the economy and society. The economic reform [*Đổi mới*] in 1986 marked a significant turning point when the country transformed into a socialist-oriented market economy. Vietnam is now a low middle-income country with per capita Gross National Income (GNI) of US\$1,980 in 2015 (World Bank, 2016) and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP current US\$) annual growth rate of 6.7% (World Bank, 2015). Social equity and people's quality of life have been steadily improved, illustrated by a continuous rise in the HDI index, placing Vietnam in the category of medium development countries (UNDP, 2015).

The rationale of this chapter is that school autonomy is a complicated concept and can vary in different education systems (Caldwell, 2014; Y. C. Cheng et al., 2016; Neeleman, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to provide contextual information relating to public secondary education and school autonomy in Vietnam. First, this chapter presents an overview of the education system and state governing bodies in education. Next, the chapter describes the current situation of teaching and learning and school management in public secondary schools. This section mentions the most noticeable features of teaching and learning practices such as recent education reform, testing and assessment, academic fraud and achievement syndrome, and private tutoring. In terms of school management, the focus is on the context of school leadership, school leadership practice, and the work of teachers. Finally, a comparison between school autonomy in *de jure* and *de facto* is made to shed light on various aspects of school autonomy in public secondary schools.

Secondary Education in Vietnam

National Education System

According to Education Law, the national educational system consists of formal education and continuing education (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005, 2009). The system includes four educational levels and training qualifications, namely preschool education with crèches and kindergartens; general education with primary education, lower secondary education and upper secondary education; professional education with technical secondary education and vocational training; and undergraduate and postgraduate education (or higher education) with college, undergraduate, master and doctoral qualifications.

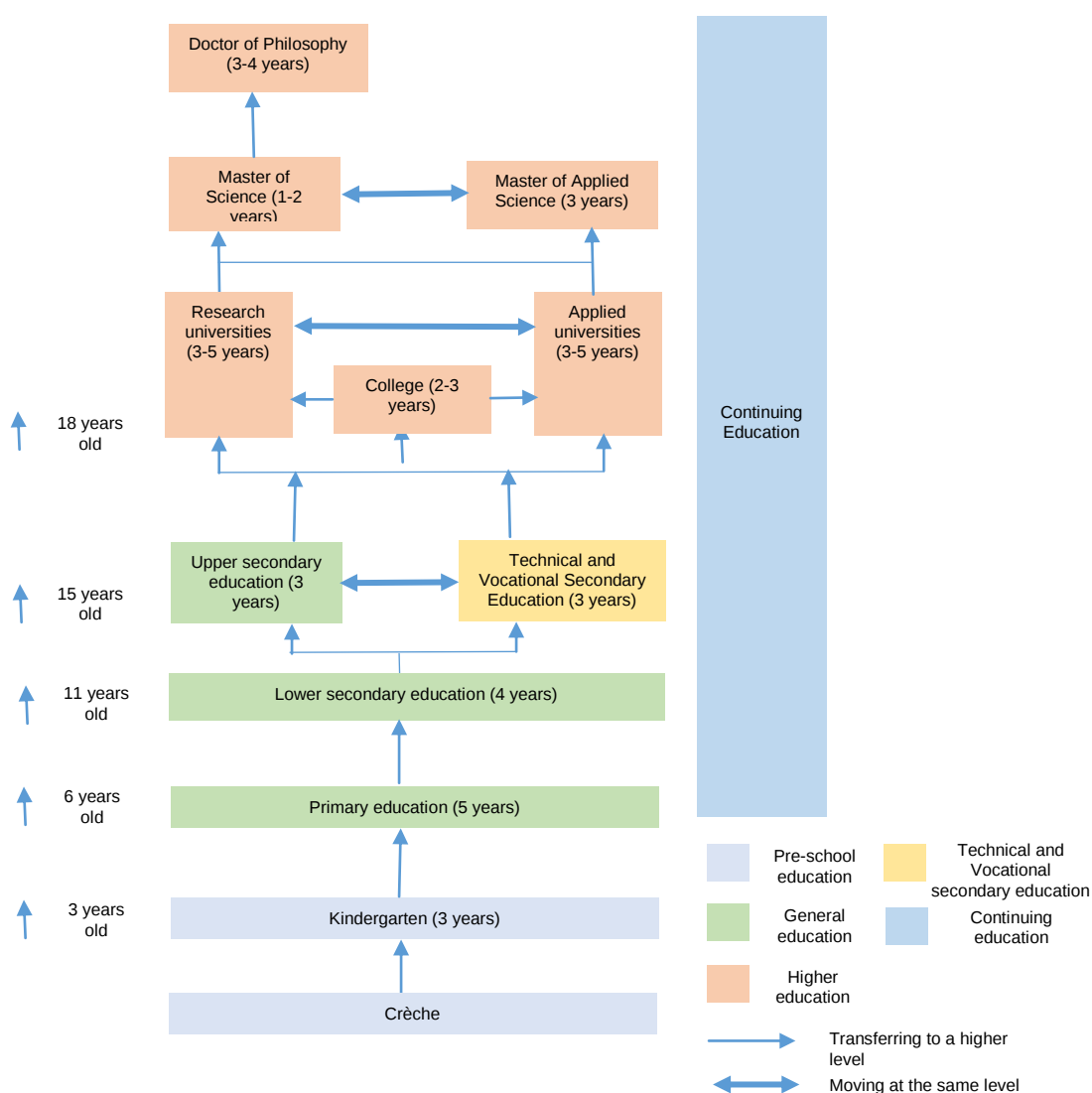


Figure 1. The national education system of Vietnam (Prime Minister, 2016)

In Vietnam, education is set as the first national priority with aims of improving people's knowledge, training human resources, and fostering talents (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005). The Education Law states the key characteristics of Vietnamese education as 'a socialist education with popular, national, scientific, and modern characteristics, based on Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's ideology' (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005, p. 3). This statement shows that the education law has put much emphasis on political and cultural transmission targets rather than skill and competency development (Doan, 2005; Duggan, 2001; K. D. Tran, 2008; D. T. Truong, 2013). School education especially is concerned with training students to be loyal to the ideology of socialism and develop their personality to meet the needs for building and defending the Fatherland (N. D. Nguyen, 2015). Although there is no national education philosophy, fundamental principles underlying Vietnamese education are linking learning with doing, linking education with life and work, linking theory to practice, and combining school education with family education and society (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005). The state budget for education has considerably increased from 15.3% in 2001 to 20% in 2010 of total Government expenditure (Central Government, 2012a).

Secondary Education

Secondary education covers lower secondary schools (Grade 6 to 9) for students aged from 12 to 15 and upper secondary schools (Grade 10 to 12) for students aged from 15 to 18. Students start lower secondary school at eleven years old, and admission to the schools is open to all students who complete primary education. After completing Grade 9, lower secondary education is finished by a students' performance review and recognition. Learning subjects include literature, mathematics, foreign languages, biology, physics, chemistry, civics education, history, geography, technology, computer sciences, arts and music, and physical education (MoET, 2009b). Students attend classes

six days per week, and every learning session lasts 45 minutes. Annual promotion is based on students' examination results and conduct (MoET, 2011c). Student graduation from lower secondary education is based on the assessment of academic and moral performance at Grade 9 (MoET, 2006a). After graduation, students are streamed into academic and vocational tracks. Those who cannot get admission to any public or private upper secondary school can follow technical and vocational secondary education (Prime Minister, 2016). Access to public upper secondary education is competitive and examination-based. The entrance examination is hugely competitive in prestigious public schools or gifted schools, where the teaching and learning quality secures university admission in the future and the number of places is limited (Trines, 2017). The transition process from lower secondary to upper secondary is most likely to result in dropouts and discontinuations, especially among the disadvantaged groups (T. P. L. Nguyen, 2015).

Upper secondary schools offer three streams of curriculum, namely basic, natural sciences, and social sciences and foreign languages (MoET, 2006b). However, the initial purpose of streaming students by learning needs and academic ability has failed due to massive pressure from high-stakes examinations. An assessment report submitted to the National Assembly states that approximately 84% of students choose the basic stream, leaving the natural sciences stream with 14% and the remaining social sciences stream with only 2%. Currently, most upper secondary schools offer basic stream only and supplement advanced lessons in subjects relating to national university entrance examination (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013).

Vietnam has gained universal admission for lower secondary education, which is targeted to become compulsory education from 2020 (Central Government, 2012a). Between the years 2001 and 2010, a remarkable improvement in enrollment rate has been observed, specifically from 70% to 85% for lower secondary education and from 33% to

50% for upper secondary education (Central Government, 2012a; MoET, 2014a). In the school year 2017-2018, there were about 5,3 million students in lower secondary school and 2,5 million students in upper secondary school. Table 1 further displays the development of secondary education in recent years.

Table 1

Secondary education in Vietnam (MoET, 2018c)

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Lower secondary schools	10,909	10,928	10,939
Public schools	10,861	10,873	10,887
Private schools	48	55	52
Students	5,138,646	5,235,524	5,373,312
Teachers	313,526	310,953	306,110
Upper secondary schools	2,788	2,811	2,834
Public schools	2,348	2,376	2,393
Private schools	440	435	441
Students	2,425,130	2,477,175	2,508,564
Teachers	150,900	150,721	150,288

The two types of secondary schools are public and private schools¹ (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005). Public schools are established and governed by state authorities, specifically BoET for lower secondary schools and DoET for upper secondary schools. Public secondary schools are financed from both government subsidies and other payment sources (Dang & Glewwe, 2017). The tuition fees vary across provinces since the Provincial People's Council regulates a ceiling fee based on the socio-economic situation of the province (Central Government, 2018). In addition, parents might have to

¹. The other types, semi-public and people-founded secondary schools, were eliminated since 2009 (MoET, 2009c).

contribute other payments to schools such as construction contributions, water charges, schoolbooks, uniforms, lunches (Dang, 2013; London, 2010). Other optional choices for parents might be sending their children to half or full-day programs in the school (London, 2010) or to ‘high quality’ or ‘normal’ classes (Dang & Glewwe, 2017). Private schools are established and funded by the social, social-professional, economic organizations, and people that are under the approval of state authorities. Recently, some provinces have piloted the model of public self-financed secondary schools. These schools are public, except for financial activities that are fully or partially self-managed under laws and regulations (D. T. Nguyen, 2009).

The education system in Vietnam has a close link to its historical and cultural background. The historical context of a millennium under Chinese domination, nearly one century under French colonial rule, the American war, and the emergence of a socialist-oriented market economy (London, 2011) have shaped distinctive features of Vietnamese culture and education. As a result, Vietnamese people have a long-established tradition of being flexible and adaptive in a practical way to foreign influences (T. T. P. Vu & Marginson, 2014). Scholars recognize that the diverse mixture of indigenous values, Confucian and Taoist values, Buddhist values, Western (French and American) values, and socialist values, influence the education system (Doan, 2005; London, 2011; T. H. Nguyen, 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016; L. H. Pham & Fry, 2011). The most noticeable cultural features are obedience in social order (Doan, 2005), the focus on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills (Ngo, Bulte, & Pilot, 2017; T. H. Nguyen, 2017), the philosophy of harmony and stability (Doan, 2005; Ngo, Meijer, Bulte, & Pilot, 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016), an emphasis more on public face than private face (Phan & Locke, 2016), and fondness for learning (Cobbe, 2007; Q. K. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008).

In short, secondary education has gained impressive achievements in terms of quantitative aspects such as school network enlargement, enrolment rate, and the participation rate of girl students (Duggan, 2001). However, there have been many limitations regarding education quality, strategic planning, and system oversight (World Bank, 2012). The education system is of low quality and efficiency (Q. K. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008) and does not meet the requirements of country development (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The specific features of public secondary education will be further discussed in the following sections.

State Governance of Secondary Education

School autonomy has a close link with education decentralization from higher to lower governing bodies and to schools. Therefore, this section explains the state governance system of secondary education in Vietnam from the central to the local level in order to elucidate school autonomy in a broad legal and structural context.

The most striking feature of state governance in Vietnam is that it is a profoundly political system (London, 2010). As the country maintains a single-party communistic state based on a Marxist-Leninist ideological background (Love, 2005), all decisions of government agencies must be under general guidelines and agenda directed by the Communist Party of Vietnam (Do, Dang, & Yuenyong, 2016; Doan, 2005). In the field of education, for instance, recent education reform was initiated by the resolution of the Communist Party (National Communist Party, 2013), and then government agencies devised action plans to realize the direction (Central Government, 2012a).

When describing the state governance system of education in Vietnam, most current literature merely mentions key agencies like the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) [*Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo*], Department of Education and Training (DoET) [*Sở Giáo dục và Đào tạo*], and Bureau of Education and Training (BoET) [*Phòng*

Giáo dục và Đào tạo]. However, the governance system is much more complicated than this description suggests (Central Government, 2017). The state governance of secondary education includes three levels, namely central, provincial, and district level. At each level, state bodies are organized in the same way, with one legislative arm (including the National Assembly [*Quốc hội*] at the central level, and People's Councils [*Hội đồng nhân dân*] at the provincial and district levels), and one executive arm (including Central Government [*Chính phủ*] at the central level, People's Committees [*Ủy ban nhân dân*] at the provincial and district levels). To implement executive functions, there are consultation bodies in the areas of education, finance, home affairs (personnel), and planning and investment. These consultation bodies are 'Ministries' [*Bộ*] at the national level, 'Departments' [*Sở*] at the provincial level, and 'Bureaux' [*Phòng*] at the district level. The state government structure is organized according to a line and functional relationship (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). This government bureaucracy in Vietnam is observed as maintaining many features inherited from the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016).

At the central level.

At the central level, the National Assembly has authority over promulgating and amending Education Law and supremely supervising the Central Government. The Central Government is the executive agency of the National Assembly and the supreme administrative body. Being a body under the Central Government, MoET is responsible for state management of education and training nationwide. As the Vietnamese education system remains highly centralized (Do & Yuenyong, 2017; Hallinger & D. T. D. T. Truong, 2014; V. C. Le, 2015; Love, 2005; H. N. Nguyen, 2016; C. B. Truong, 2016), MoET is the only source of all formal leadership in the field of education (T. P. L. Nguyen, 2015). It promulgates general standards and regulations in most key areas such

as education objectives, curriculum and learning content, textbook, testing and assessment, admission, degrees, school infrastructure and equipment, quality assurance and accreditation, teacher standards, education manager standards, and policies for teachers and education managers (Central Government, 2017). For secondary schools, the most important legal document is the Secondary School Charter [*Điều lệ trường trung học*] that regulates schools' tasks and responsibilities, school organization and management, education curriculum and activities, teachers, students, school asset, and school-students' parents-community relationship (MoET, 2011c). These regulations and standards provide a robust framework for local authorities and secondary schools to apply in practice. Other ministries such as the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Home Affairs are only responsible for working with MoET to promulgate general regulations in respective areas, for instance, cost norms for educational activities or employee tenure quotas in schools. These general regulations can be subject to localization at provincial levels according to the socio-economic situation in the province.

Although MoET's centralization might be useful in maintaining quality standard nationwide, it is viewed as 'inflexible top-down management' (V. C. Le, 2015, p. 183) that restricts local diversification and induces passive compliance of education authorities at lower levels (T. H. Le, 2013). In addition, education policies at the central level lack synchronicity and appropriateness to local practice (Central Government, 2012a). For example, T. P. L. Nguyen (2015) pointed out that one school must respond to many overlapping standards and requirements promulgated by MoET, such as national standards for schools, regulations on friendly schools and active students, accreditation, inspection, professional standards for teachers, leadership standards for school leaders and standards for libraries. From analyzing unresolved conflicts between financial norms

and physical norms, Cobbe (2007) concluded that many norms are outdated, inconsistent, and unrealistic. It is likely that these norms could not be fully observed in practice.

At the local level.

At the provincial level, the Provincial People's Council is a local assembly which represents local people to decide the most critical issues relating to education in that province, such as the education development strategic plan, annual state budget for education, and tuition fees norm. Being an executive arm, the Provincial People's Committee is responsible to both the central Government and the Provincial People's Council for state management of education in the province. To manage education, the Committee has three main consulting agencies, namely the DoET, Department of Finance, and Department of Home Affairs. DoET is mainly responsible for managing upper secondary education in the province and directing district BoETs. It has dual accountability to MoET and the Provincial People's Committee. Other departments have a collaborative relationship with DoET to exercise state management in respective areas, but they have neither a directive role nor line relationship to upper secondary schools. At the district level, similarly, the District People's Council decides the foremost issues relating to education in the district. The District People's Committee is accountable to both the Provincial People's Committee and the District People's Council for state management of education in the district area. The structure of consulting agencies at the district level also includes BoET, the Bureau of Finance, and the Bureau of Home Affairs. BoET is responsible for managing lower secondary schools. It has dual accountability to DoET and to the District People's Committee.

While educational matters are strongly centralized to MoET, budget and personnel issues are decentralized to the provincial level. However, not all provinces enjoy the same level of decentralization in education; for instance, the rich and urban provinces have

more autonomy than those in poor and remote areas (Love, 2005). Because of decentralization, state management in education might vary between provinces (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). In some provinces, the Committee can grant all authorities in all fields of education, school budget, and personnel to DoET and BoET. Whereas in others, DoET and BoET might have authority on educational issues only while financial management is distributed to DoF and BoF, and personnel management is assigned to DoHA and BoHA. The latter situation, in which authority is shared between different bodies, might lead to dissonance and ineffectiveness in distributing resources (Love, 2005)

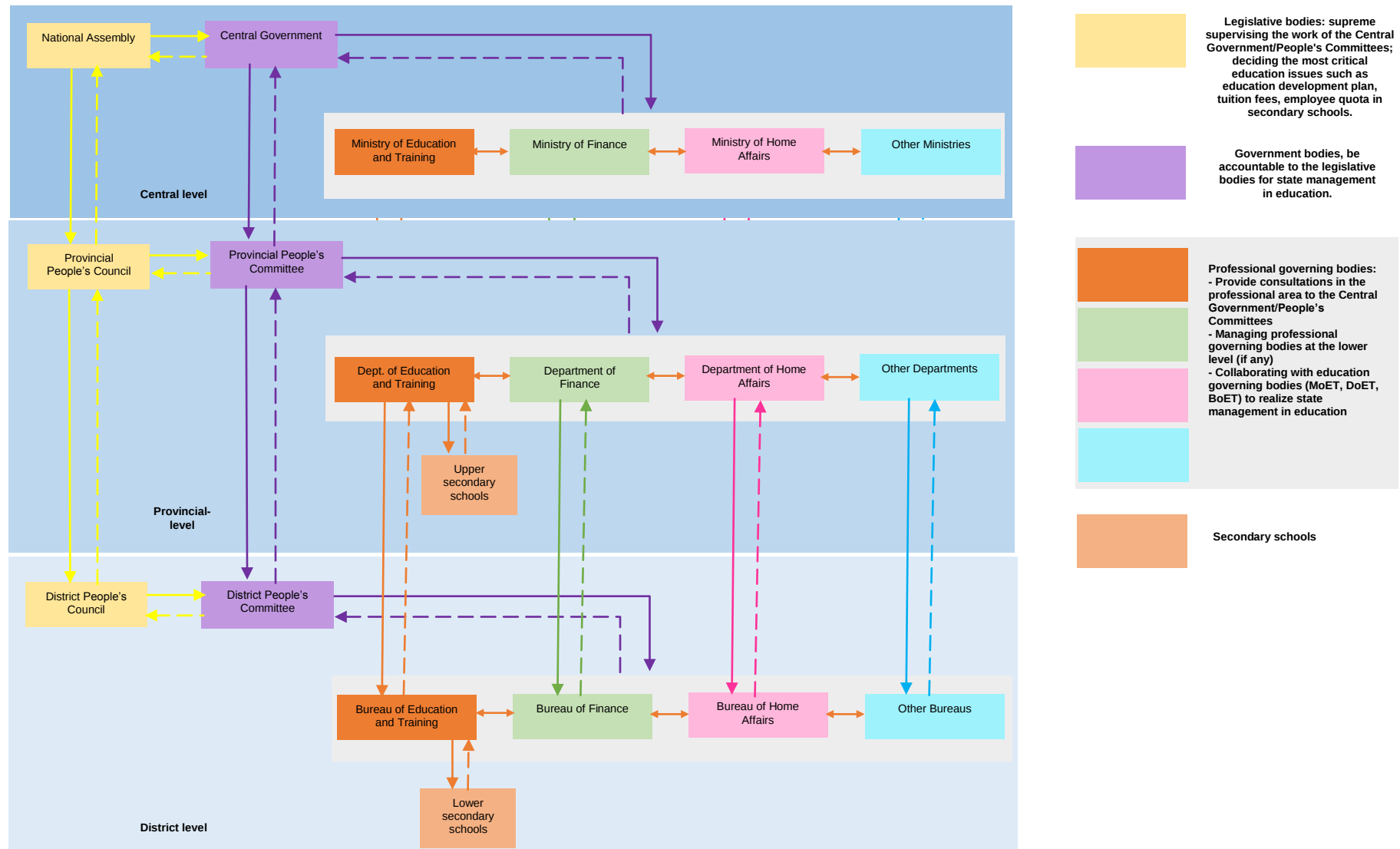


Figure 2. State governing bodies' roles in secondary education. Source: Author's adaptation from Central Government (2017, 2018)

Teaching and Learning in Public Secondary Schools

Teaching and Learning in the Context of Confucian Cultural Heritage

This section analyzes the most noticeable features of Confucian culture and its influence on teaching and learning in Vietnam. First and foremost, Confucian culture especially emphasizes respect for and obedience to the social order (Doan, 2005). In teaching and learning, traditionally, teachers were ranked as even more important than fathers in the hierarchy of the feudal system: the king – the teacher – the father (P. M. Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005). In society generally, teachers are highly valued, as the Vietnamese proverb highlights ‘without a teacher, you sure cannot do anything’ [*Không thầy đố mày làm nên*] and the teaching profession is recognized as the most highly respected in society. In terms of teaching and learning, teachers are expected to be an authoritative source of knowledge, and their mission is to transmit, explain, and instill knowledge to students (T. H. Nguyen, 2017). This concept creates a hierarchical student-teacher relationship where teachers maintain a superior role to deliver knowledge and control the teaching and learning process (T. M. H. Nguyen & Hall, 2017). The role of teachers is particularly important when they are in charge of not only teaching knowledge but also modeling good behaviors and shaping students’ personalities (T. T. H. Pham, 2008; C. B. Truong, 2016). Student-teacher interaction is mainly unilateral from teachers to students, and there are almost no dialogues, discussions, or hands-on tasks during teaching and learning (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. H. Nguyen, 2017).

Second, as Confucian heritage culture puts a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge, teaching and learning in Vietnam focus on factual knowledge rather than practical application (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. H. Nguyen, 2017). The worthiest source of knowledge resides in textbooks (V. C. Le, 2015), which are considered as ‘transcendental, immutable, and eternally true’ (T. H. Nguyen, 2017, p. 99). T. H.

Nguyen (2017) found that the definition of good teaching refers to the strict covering of textbooks. Teachers encourage students to reproduce correct answers that could be found in textbooks or teachers' lectures (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017). One important goal of teaching and learning in most schools is to ensure alignment between curriculum objectives, textbook content, and test results (Nguyen & Wu, 2012). When the central task of teachers is to follow and deliver textbook content accurately and adequately (Grassick, 2016), it leads to negative consequences such as rote memorization and a passive learning style of students (Hamano, 2008; V. C. Le, 2015). As lessons are generally conducted at high speed to introduce all learning content embodied in the textbook, many students are neglected (Saito, Tsukui, & Tanaka, 2008). An emphasis on the exclusive power of teachers and textbook has resulted in an underestimation of students, who are viewed as the passive recipients of knowledge rather than active knowledge constructors (T. H. Nguyen, 2017). Students are required to remember knowledge introduced in the textbook and teachers' lectures and reflect this knowledge in tests (Grassick, 2016). Criticizing knowledge, questioning, thinking independently or expressing personal views are discouraged, because students are expected to respect their teachers and trust in the textbook absolutely (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. H. Nguyen, 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016; C. B. Truong, 2016; Grassick, 2016). Moreover, the traditional agricultural culture of Vietnamese society, Taoism and Buddhism share the philosophy of harmony and stability between person and person, humanity and nature (Doan, 2005; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016). Therefore, questioning teachers, voicing personal views, criticizing peer's opinions, group work and peer evaluations are strange practices that might harm traditional values of harmony such as in the classroom in the family, and in regarding teachers are good parents (T. H. Nguyen, 2017). These are enormous obstacles for students to overcome in developing personal

characteristics and becoming independent, self-confident, and interactive learners (Ngo, Meijer, et al., 2017).

Third, fondness for learning is one of the vital traditional values of Vietnamese culture (Cobbe, 2007; Q. K. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008). In addition, Confucian tradition puts a high value on education when learning is the only way to cultivate people and to be successful in their life (T. H. Nguyen, 2017). Therefore, students are always encouraged to learn hard and achieve excellent performance in examinations (C. B. Truong, 2016). Parents are willing to make every effort to support their children's education such as investing financial resources or finding the best schools or teachers (N. L. L. Nguyen, 2018).

In short, due to the influence of cultural values, a traditional classroom is typically teacher-centered, transmission-based, and textbook-based (V. C. Le, 2015; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. H. Nguyen, 2017). Consequently, although Vietnamese students might achieve good academic performance in tests and exams, they lack necessary skills for the 21st century such as problem-solving skills, teamwork, and cooperation (Dimmock & Tan, 2016; T. T. H. Pham, 2008).

Curriculum and Textbook

Under a centralized management system, curriculum, textbooks, the number of teaching and learning hours and instruction scheduling are regulated by MoET to maintain common practices and standards nationwide (Doan, 2005). There is only one set of textbooks developed by the National Institute for Educational Sciences and published by the Educational Publishing House, which are both under the umbrella of MoET (Grassick, 2016). In 2006, MoET embarked on a curriculum and textbook reform to secondary education with a primary aim to reform teaching and learning approach. The noticeable strengths of curriculum and textbook are up to date knowledge and well-

structured learning content (MoET, 2008). MoET has adapted Western ideologies and set ambitious objectives for the curriculum, such as a student-centered approach, constructive learning, and cooperative learning (Hamano, 2008). However, contrary to the high expectations of MoET, curriculum and textbooks are sharply criticized. The curriculum is mainly used to transfer knowledge rather than to develop skills and competencies (Bodewig et al., 2014; Varbelow & Gee, 2018). Learning content is difficult and overloading to most students, overly theoretical, and lacking practical applicability (V. C. Le, 2015). Despite orienting to the student-centered approach, the curriculum ignores students' needs and learning styles (Duong, 2013). For example, T. A. Le (2006) found that the Mathematics textbook introduces some theoretical knowledge which is inappropriate to students' cognitive capacity. The overwhelming volume of mathematical knowledge in one lesson discourages teachers from applying student-centered methods (T. A. Le, 2006). Next, the curriculum pays keen attention to knowledge learning objectives, whereas students' character development objectives are not clear (MoET, 2008). Last, the central curriculum and textbook seem not to be suitable for local context and school's features, especially in disadvantaged areas (MoET, 2008; H. T. Nguyen, 2011). These limitations might be attributed to the fact that the national curriculum and textbooks are developed by MoET's experts, researchers and educators who are top-notch in the academic field but lack teaching experience, whereas school teachers have little chance to contribute reflections and ideas (H. T. Nguyen, 2011).

Substantial changes in curriculum and textbooks are expected to generate improvements in teaching and learning practice. However, in the early stages of reform, authors reported that teaching and learning still mainly focus on transmitting and memorizing knowledge, strictly adhering to textbooks (Hamano, 2008; V. C. Le & Barnard, 2009; P. M. Nguyen et al., 2005; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Recent studies continue

depicting a dismal picture where traditional teaching and learning practices remain unchanged over many years. The most dominant approach is teacher-centered and the most frequent teaching and learning methods are lecturing and questioning (Duong, 2013; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; Ngo, Meijer, Bulte, & Pilot, 2015; T. H. Nguyen, 2017; T. T. H. Pham, 2008). Teachers pay little attention to students' learning needs, particularly those who lag behind the extremely fast-paced lessons (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Many studies describe slow improvements in terms of teaching and learning in some subjects such as literature (Duong, 2013), sciences (Ngo et al., 2015), physics (H. N. Nguyen, 2016), mathematics (T. A. Le, 2006), and English (T. T. H. Pham, 2008).

Most authors agree that the major constraint on curriculum and textbook reform is a severe conflict between the traditional Confucian heritage culture and innovative principles. For example, a textbook-based approach and teacher dominance are at odds with constructive knowledge and a student-centered approach (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; N. L. L. Nguyen, 2018). T. T. H. Pham (2008) found that it is tough for teachers to change from their authoritative role to a facilitating role that supports and motivates students' constructive learning. For students, a passive learning style, a lack of communicative and group working skills might be significant barriers to taking the central role in the learning process. Besides, teaching and learning reform is strongly affected by systemic factors, such as pressure from high-stakes examinations, large class size, rigid teaching and learning schedule, and tight controls from local governing bodies (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; H. T. Nguyen, 2011; Hamano, 2008; Saito & Tsukui, 2008; V. C. Le, 2015). Next, as teachers were not well-prepared for implementing the new curriculum, they did not fully understand the new curriculum and maintained that remodelling teaching and learning methods impairs education quality (H. T. Nguyen, 2011).

In 2018, the government issued a new national general curriculum [*Chương trình giáo dục phổ thông tổng thể*] that will be applied from the school year 2019-2020 (MoET, 2018b). The new curriculum is expected to make substantial changes to teaching and learning in secondary education. First, while the current curriculum is content-oriented, which puts a strong emphasis on transmitting knowledge and students' replication ability, the new curriculum is competency-based with aims to develop essential competencies² for students (MoET, 2018b). Second, the new curriculum pays more attention to the linkage between class grades and subjects in one curriculum. It is the first time that a general unified curriculum that covers all subjects of all grades has been issued³ (MoET, 2018b). Third, the new curriculum divides two stages of general education, which include the basic education stage (primary education and lower secondary education) and profession-oriented education stage (upper secondary education). In the latter, besides traditional academic subjects, the curriculum offers optional subjects and learning content that aim to orient professions for students (MoET, 2018b). Last, the new curriculum leaves more space for local authority, schools, and teachers to select or develop localized learning content. It is planned that there could be many textbooks from other publishers and authors instead of only one national textbook (MoET, 2018b). These changes will bring greater opportunities for schools and teachers to enjoy more autonomy in curriculum development and education.

² Competency is defined as personal characteristics, which are formed and developed from personal attributes and the education process. It allows students to use knowledge, skills, and other personal attributes such as belief, interest, fortitude to successfully perform an activity, and gain expected results in certain conditions. The new curriculum set core competencies and specific competences. Core competences, which are formed and developed via all subjects and educational activities, include self-determination and self-study, communication and cooperation, problem-solving, and creativity. Specific competencies, which are formed and developed via certain subjects and educational activities, include language, calculating, science, aesthetic, physical health (MoET, 2018b).

³ Previously there was only one national curriculum for every subject.

Testing and Assessment

Testing and assessment in secondary education include classroom assessments, and examinations (T. P. L. Nguyen, 2015). MoET strictly regulates this area, such as the type and number of tests and assessments to be conducted during a school year (World Bank, 2009). At the school level, classroom assessment consists of formative and summative assessment. The former includes oral tests, written tests, and practice-oriented tests, while the latter includes fifty five-minute written or practice-oriented tests and final semester exams (MoET, 2011c). Classroom assessments are designed to test students' fulfillment of the national curriculum and textbook objectives and to test students' remembered knowledge (T. H. Nguyen, 2017), whereas students' competencies and skills are not assessed (L. A. Pham, 2017). Test results are used mainly for accounting to school administrators, education managers, and parents rather than for improving instruction or supporting students (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; World Bank, 2009).

Examinations in secondary schools include upper secondary school entrance exams, national upper secondary exams, and contests for gifted students (T. P. L. Nguyen, 2015). These examinations are rigorously competitive because it evaluates students' performance for making high-stakes decisions such as enrollment in the next level of education (Bodewig, 2014; Dang & Rogers, 2016). The examination results also reflect school performance and contribute to school prestige (Dang & Rogers 2016; T. P. L. Nguyen, 2015). Therefore, teaching and learning in secondary schools are strongly driven by high-stakes examinations, and the ultimate goal of school education is exam preparation (Varbelow & Gee, 2018; H. N. Nguyen, 2016; T. H. Nguyen, 2017). The high expectations of local governing bodies, schools, and students' parents towards test scores deter secondary schools from innovating in teaching and learning (N. D. Nguyen, 2015). Do and Yuenyong (2017) took an example from the introduction of multiple-choice tests

to high-stakes exams in upper secondary education since 2007. Although the initial purpose of multiple-choice test was to broaden the coverage of assessment, this form of assessment led to the negative consequences that teaching and learning in secondary schools grew increasingly concentrated on sharpening techniques or tricks to deal with multiple-choice questions. Most tests in schools were changed to this format to familiarize students with the official test rather than to assess student performance or to improve teaching and learning practice (Do & Yuenyoung, 2017; T. P. L, Nguyen, 2015).

Before 2015, Grade 12 students completed upper secondary education by taking one graduation examination which tested students' knowledge in six subjects, of which mathematics, literature, and foreign languages were core subjects, and the three remaining ones were changed every year (MoET, 2012a). The graduation examination was followed by a national entrance university examination, which was especially important to all students and parents (Dang, 2013). It was organized according to blocks that were a set of three subjects. There were block A (mathematics, physics, chemistry), A1 (mathematics, physics, English), B (mathematics, chemistry, biology), C (literature, history, geography), and D (mathematics, literature, foreign languages). Students chose their test block according to the admission requirements of the university. MoET, in cooperation with universities, centrally organized the national entrance university examination. Since 2015, when these two examinations were merged into only one national upper secondary education examination [*Kỳ thi trung học phổ thông quốc gia*], some remarkable changes have been observed over the years (MoET, 2015, 2016, 2017). First, the exam results are used as both a graduation certificate for students and to apply for university admission. Second, instead of testing knowledge in certain key subjects of the blocks, the exams expanded to many subjects of the general curriculum. In addition, the scope of testing was expanded from knowledge in Grade 12 to all knowledge introduced in upper secondary

education. Third, the exams were no longer organized in some big cities but decentralized to all provinces. As this new policy has been recently implemented, there has not yet been any scientific literature analyzing its pros and cons.

Academic Fraud and Achievement Syndrome

One of the most severe problems of secondary education has been achievement syndrome and academic fraud (National Communist Party, 2013). Academic fraud refers to misconduct behaviors such as gaming or cheating in teaching, learning, and testing to get high scores, while achievement syndrome refers to exaggerated reports on the educational achievements of students, teachers, schools, and governing bodies (McAleavy, T. H. Tran, & Pitzpatrick, 2018). Both cultural and system reasons could explain these problems. First, most parents prefer choosing public schools, whereas the public education system fails to provide learning opportunities for all students (Dang, 2013). When getting entrance into public schools becomes a fierce competition, it can lead to academic dishonesty in exams. Second, as rooted in Confucian culture, parents and students highly value achievements in tests and examinations (T. H. Nguyen, 2017) as the only way to be successful in learning and life. Third, a bureaucratic system with a top-down vector has put considerable pressure on lower levels. Governing bodies impose ambitious objectives and performance indicators on lower bodies and schools. Consequently, teachers, schools, and local governing bodies tend to report exaggerated statistics to higher authority to be recognized and rewarded (London, 2010).

Since the school year 2006-2007, MoET has launched a massive movement of ‘Say no to academic fraud and achievement syndrome’ [*Nói không với tiêu cực trong thi cử và bệnh thành tích trong giáo dục*] to eliminate these shortcomings in education (MoET, 2006c). The movement gained some positive results in the early years (2006-2009), illustrated by a dramatic decrease in the graduation rate of upper secondary

students. However, most solutions applied in the movement, like organizing information campaigns or declaring strong commitment, cannot radically solve crucial weaknesses of the education system such as low teaching and learning quality, low responsiveness of the public education system, or social discrimination between public and private schools. Consequently, the graduation rate has increased back to the previous level (see Table 2) while there has been no significant improvement in education quality.

Table 2

The graduation rate of upper secondary students over the academic years 2006 -2015 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2018)

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Graduation rate	93.7	80.42	86.58	83.82	92.57	95.72	97.98	98.75	93.85	93.85

Private Tutoring

Shadow education refers to extra study classes alongside mainstream education to provide students with knowledge that they do not obtain during official school hours (Dang, 2013). Shadow education, private tutoring, extra study, or supplementary education are not rare practices in Asian countries (Bray, 2014) and this has been a growingly noticeable feature of Vietnamese secondary education (Dang & Rogers, 2016; Dang, 2013). Although the official instructional time at secondary schools is around four hours per day, most students spend on-average 89 hours per year attending private tutoring classes, and the higher the education level, the longer the time students spend on them (Dang, 2013). Approximately 40% of households in Vietnam send their children to private tutoring classes, and up to 90% of them spend between 1% and 5% of household expenditure on it (Dang & Rogers, 2016). Wealthier families spend more on private tutoring than do poorer ones (Dang, 2013; Bodewig et al., 2014). Extra study is such an urban phenomenon that in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, parents spend up to 15% of household expenditure, which is equivalent to US\$ 100 per month, on

children's extra study (London, 2010). Supplementary classes can be organized by parents, teachers, schools, or private education centers, of which private tutoring organized by schools are most popular (Dang, 2013). The proliferation of extra study in Vietnam has been mainly driven by high-stakes exams as across all types of tutoring, the most important reason given is to prepare for high-stakes exams (Dang & Rogers, 2016; N. D. Nguyen, 2015). Extra study is assumed to be a critical factor contributing to the improvement of students' scores at the school and increasing their chances of getting into their preferred universities (London, 2010; Dang, 2013). Next, the shortage of instructional time in schools due to an overloaded curriculum leads students to attending supplementary classes to catch up with the class (Dang & Glewwe, 2017). Finally, private tutoring is driven by the low wages of teachers, which forces them to open private tutoring classes (London, 2010).

There has been no firm evidence on the positive impact of extra study on students' academic performance. In contrast, the extra study raises the concern of undermining teachers' motivation to perform well during formal instructional hours (Bodewig et al., 2014). Furthermore, extra study is severely criticized for increasing the financial burden on parents and promoting inequality by making student academic success more contingent on household financial affordability (London, 2010; Budewig et al., 2014). It might also widen disparities between the rich and the poor, the urban and rural areas, and ethnic majority groups and minority groups (Dang & Rogers, 2016). For students, due to the pressure of high-stakes exams and extra study, most of them must cope with a substantial learning workload (N. Du Nguyen, 2015). From analyzing legal documents of the central government and local governing bodies, (Dang & Rogers, 2016) found that MoET neither completely bans nor encourages private tutoring but it tends to control and manage this practice. Currently, public secondary schools can organize extra study

legally, whereas public school teachers who hold a tenure position are prohibited from organizing their private tutoring classes (MoET, 2012b). However, the current weak monitoring system of education governing bodies seems to be ineffective in controlling this phenomenon (Dang & Rogers, 2016).

In summary, although education authorities have made remarkable efforts to renovate teaching and learning in a wide variety of aspects such as curriculum and textbook, teaching and learning method, testing and assessment, there has been a big gap between authorities' expectations and practice. Centrally inflexible curriculum, overwhelming learning content of textbooks, outdated teaching and learning methods, teaching to the test tendency, academic fraud, and achievement syndrome are significant contemporary challenges to secondary education.

School Leadership in Public Secondary Schools

School Leadership

This section aims to highlight a mixture of political, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that contextualize school leadership in Vietnam and the most striking features of school leadership in public secondary schools. The contextual factors of dual lines of authority, Confucian cultural heritage, and Western value adoption, a highly centralized governance structure, and a top-down mechanism of the education system have led to many unique features of school leadership in Vietnam.

First, school headship in Vietnam is subject to a dual line of political and bureaucratic authority (Duggan, 2001; Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; A. Walker & Hallinger, 2015). On the one hand, school management is always under the direction of the Communist Party where the party sets a parallel authority structure from central to provincial, district, and school level (London, 2011). In each school, the Communist Party Committee is the supreme political organ of school with the highest decision

making authority on most main school issues and practice (McAleavy et al., 2018). All school members, regardless of party affiliation status, must obey and implement the directives of the Party (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). To keep school practice in line with political directives, one prerequisite for promoting the school principal is that the candidate must complete a training course on the political ideology of the Communist Party (MoET, 2009a). In public schools, principals generally hold a General Secretary position in the Communist Party of that school, or at least be a party member (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Hallinger, Walker, T. H. D. Nguyen, D. T. Truong, & T. T. Nguyen, 2017). On the other hand, in terms of state management, principals are labeled as ‘official’⁴ [*công chức*] which signifies a member of the state. Consequently, principals are subject to rigorous external scrutiny from governing bodies like DoET and BoET and are accountable to the local representative of the Communist Party (McAleavy et al., 2018).

Due to the hierarchy of the administrative system, school principals play an essential role in connecting the school community to external governing bodies (McAleavy et al., 2018). They must pay special attention to building good relationships with their superior officers in both the education bureaucracy and the political structure (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016). Most of them spend a considerable amount of time outside the school campus on establishing and maintaining a relationship with authority officers (Hallinger et al., 2017). Principals have to work closely with DoET or BoET to get policy direction and guidance from them to correctly implement policies at the school. It is an essential strategy to gain access to important information and obtain support and resources for their schools as well as to maintain the principal’s credibility and legitimacy (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger et al., 2017). On the other

⁴ Teachers in public schools, who hold tenure position, are labeled as ‘civil servant’ [*viên chức*]

hand, they represent the school and teachers to provide feedbacks related to policy implementation (McAleavy et al., 2018).

Second, as education issues are tightly regulated by central government, and finance and personnel matters are managed by local governing bodies (Cobbe, 2007), Vietnamese principals have the least discretion among East Asian countries (Hallinger & Walker, 2017). When school targets and plans must match the targets and strategies determined by higher governing bodies and the Communist Party (Hallinger et al., 2017; T. H. Le, 2013), school principals have limited room for applying their own initiatives. For example, school performance indicators, which are determined by central authorities, put a particular emphasis on academic success such as graduation rate, students' academic performance, and prizes and the number of teachers receiving prizes and merit titles (D. T. Truong et al., 2017). Therefore, when setting the school strategy, principals must pay special attention to fulfilling these official evaluation criteria rather than introducing personal visions and ideas that they wish to realize (Hallinger et al., 2017). In interviews with school principals, Hallinger et al. (2017) observed that no one considered lifelong learning, critical thinking, student integrity or satisfaction as their targets. Their work must mainly concentrate on implementing the goals, visions, and objectives set by higher authorities (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger & Walker, 2017). Consequently, principals become passive and tend to wait for and depend on guidelines and directions of governing bodies in most decisions (T. H. Le, 2013).

Third, school leadership practice is strongly affected by the Confucian cultural context with the most prominent concepts of power distance, collectivism, and prestige respect (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Phan & Locke, 2016). Power distance is defined as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally'

(Hofstede, 2001, p. 61). Vietnam scored high on the Power Distance Index (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2005), which shows an emphasis on a strong hierarchical relationship. Hallinger & D. T. Truong (2016) illustrated this feature through a proverb: ‘Above must be above, and below must be below’ [*Trên phải ra trên, dưới phải ra dưới*]. In countries with a centralized administrative system, school leadership is considered as very authoritarian and hierarchical with an emphasis on rules, regulations, and formal structure (D. T. Truong, 2013). Within a school, school principals hold absolute formal power and maintain a precise distance from their subordinates as a way to strengthen their power, authority and status (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger & Walker, 2017; D. T. Truong, 2013; McAleavy et al., 2018). The prevalent leadership style is autocratic, top-down, and directive (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Thayer, 2014). Teachers are not encouraged to challenge their superior’s opinions (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016). Most principals tend to adopt a top-down approach in communicating school targets to teachers, for example sharing in official school meetings or conveying via subject leaders (Hallinger et al., 2017; D. T. Truong, 2013). This leadership style seems to be vastly different from the school-based decision-making tradition in most Western countries, McAleavy et al. (2018) commented.

Interestingly, school leadership in Vietnam is a mix between authoritarian leadership with a strict hierarchical command and moral leadership with a strong personal influence of the leader on his or her subordinates (T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016; D. T. Truong & Hallinger, 2015; D. T. Truong et al., 2017). Two strategies of moral leadership exercised by Vietnamese principals are setting modeling and building positive relationships with their staff (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). Principals are expected to be role models in the school community and maintain an image of prestigious leaders (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Hallinger et al., 2017). Principal’s prestige and moral

character are vital factors, which could be even more important than his or her competencies, to gain trust, respect, and commitment from subordinates (D. T. Truong & Hallinger, 2015). In addition, building harmonious relationships with subordinates is a strategy to increase the principals' moral quality and credibility (Hallinger et al., 2017). For instance, Vietnamese people put special emphasis on saving individual public face with a wish to be appreciated and respected by others (T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2015; Phan & Locke, 2016). Therefore, if teachers make mistakes, principals are likely to have private conversations with teachers to gently warn and advise them rather than voice public criticism (Hallinger et al., 2017).

Next, as Vietnam is a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1980), school management highly values loyalty, harmony, cooperation, and conformity with traditional rules and norms (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). Therefore, school leaders make every effort to maintain harmony, stability, and solidarity within the school. Cultivating harmonious relationships within school helps principals manage school smoothly, maintain teachers' loyalty and commitment, build mutual trust and consolidate the leader's prestige (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger et al., 2017; N. H. Tran, Hallinger, D. T. Truong, 2018). School leadership emphasizes nurturing group and school collaboration rather than promoting individual values (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016). In Vietnamese schools, harmony, which is an important performance indicator of school leadership, is treated as an end, in and of itself. Teachers highly appreciate leaders who show care for collective values, for instance setting a collaborative learning environment, organizing activities for all teachers, or setting a school welfare fund to support all teachers (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016). Furthermore, principals have to avoid conflict at all costs because it might harm school prestige or credibility. To solve conflicts, principals

tend to adopt negotiation and information block strategies to protect school prestige and maintain stability (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016).

In terms of instructional leadership, the principal's roles are centrally determined in legal documents that point out the desirable behaviors of instructional leaders. Domains of responsibilities include curriculum management, instructional practice, teaching and learning development, co-curricular activities, and relationship management with external stakeholders (MoET, 2009a). The literature on the instructional leadership role of principals has shown controversial results. The study of Walker & Hallinger (2015) reports that there is little evidence of the impact of school leadership on teaching and learning as well as student learning outcomes. Although Vietnamese principals hold absolute power, much more than their counterparts in other East Asian countries, in terms of making instructional decisions at the school level, they are also struggle most with the tension between political and instructional roles (Walker & Hallinger, 2015). Their instructional leadership role is described as 'confused, lacking coordination, causal and arbitrary, unsystematic, and formalistic' (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, p. 54). Instructional leadership is not the central role activity of principals but rather the managerial and political roles (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). In contrast, recent studies have found that school principals are turning more attention to improving teaching and learning as well as teacher's professional development (Hallinger et al., 2017; N. H. Tran et al., 2018; McAleavy et al., 2018). Besides the responsibility of monitoring teaching quality, principals actively act as coaches, mentors, and advisers to help teachers improve teaching and learning, or create supporting systems to facilitate professional exchange in the school community (N. H. Tran et al., 2018; McAleavy et al., 2018).

Teachers in Public Secondary Schools

In the school year 2017-2018, there were 306,110 lower secondary education teachers and 150,288 upper secondary education teachers (MoET, 2018c). To be qualified as teachers, the former must hold at least a college diploma while the latter must hold at least a bachelor's degree (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005). The teacher workforce is better qualified in recent years (Bodewig et al., 2014; McAleavy et al., 2018).

Traditionally, teachers are highly respected in Vietnamese society (Doan, 2005; P. M. Nguyen et al., 2005; T. T. H. Pham, 2008; C. B. Truong, 2016). However, teachers' work in public schools is extremely challenging and stressful. First, when being ranked lowest in hierarchical education structure, Vietnamese teachers get a deficient degree of professional autonomy because all teaching and learning content, textbooks, learning outcomes, and student assessment are regulated and standardized by governing bodies (N. D. Nguyen, 2015). Moreover, teachers are under pressure to satisfy demands from all higher-level education authorities, political authorities, and school managers (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Saito et al., 2016). They are often overloaded with the voluminous amount of paper work when education authorities frequently check various types of documents such as teaching and learning plans, and teaching schedule notebooks. (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Teachers must obey and execute directives from school managers without resistance (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016). Education authorities and school principals can have authority on make regular or ad hoc checks on teachers' teaching without prior announcement (D. T. Truong & Hallinger, 2015). These monitors are likely to be administrative procedures or teacher performance evaluation rather than professional development. Therefore, teachers tend to 'act' to meet the requirements of higher governing authorities (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). Teachers must also become involved in many campaigns or community activities, which limit their time for

professional development or teaching preparation (H. T. Nguyen, 2011; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017). Second, when the subject curriculum is centrally regulated, teachers have no room for selecting and modifying instructional content but a minimal autonomy to select teaching and learning methods (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). However, their desire for renovating teaching and learning methods might be limited by the requirement of delivering accurately and sufficiently textbook content (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). Last, teachers must meet great expectations from students and their parents on a high student academic result (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Due to these pressures, teachers shown negative emotions such as disappointment, despondency, and unhappiness, and a low sense of self-efficacy. They feel powerless and that their professional autonomy seems to be infringed (Phan & Locke, 2016). Saito & Tsukui (2008) described the situation as follows:

Teachers in schools also feel great concern and face pressure with regard to examinations, which cover the entire scope of the textbooks. This pressure for excelling in the terminal examinations leads to the teachers' tendency to cover the whole curriculum through one-sided lectures and impose upon students the task of memorizing the contents as a mandate of schooling education ... Being a teacher tends to be recognized as having the authority and responsibility to 'teach right things' to children; further, a teacher is perceived as the only person who knows the truth and the right answers in a classroom and as one who guides innocent students (p. 573).

Third, although the teaching profession is highly valued in society, teachers are so underpaid when their salary is not able to cover household expenses (D. C. Nguyen, 2017; McAleavy et al., 2018). For instance, the starting monthly salary of a newly

recruited teacher is VND 2,541,000 – 2,831,000 (around the US \$ 115-130)⁵, which is lower by US \$ 70-80 than the average income of a person in the urban areas (General Statistics of Vietnam, 2016a). This salary is not able to cover the living costs for a person in an urban area in Vietnam, which is VND 3,059,000 (approximately US \$ 140) (General Statistics of Vietnam, 2016b). The study of D. C. Nguyen (2017) presents a realistic picture of teachers' struggle to live when their income is below-average. Therefore, teachers have to do extra jobs out of school time, most popularly organizing private tutor classes (Cobbe, 2007; Do & Yuenyong, 2017; D. C. Nguyen, 2017; H. T. Nguyen, 2011; McAleavy et al., 2018). According to London (2010), Vietnam is a typical example of private tutoring being driven by teachers' low wages. Private tuition contributes a substantial part of teachers' income and helps in their retention of their job (McAleavy et al., 2018). Besides low salary, hard work, and accountability pressure are factors contributing to a decrease in teachers' professional and organizational commitment (N. Du Nguyen, 2015; Hamano, 2008).

Although clearly understanding these difficulties, most teachers prefer working in public schools with a tenured position to secure for life (T. H. Pham, 2008) as a consequence of the traditional agricultural culture and the philosophy of stability (Doan, 2005; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016). Teachers feel safe and comfortable when working in schools where harmony and solidarity prevails (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016). However, this perception might be a disadvantage to teachers' work motivation and professional development for the following reasons. First, once having been officially recruited, teachers increasingly become passive and have no learning motivation because they have no fear of possibly losing their job (T. H. Le, 2013). To be more specific,

⁵ Starting monthly salary for those who hold a college degree is US \$ 115 and for those who hold a bachelor degree is US \$ 130.

teachers generally are recruited and dismissed by the Provincial People's Committee (for upper secondary schools) or the District People's Committee (for lower secondary schools) (Central Government, 2012b). Once being officially recruited, teachers' working position is secured until their retirement, and schools have no authority to dismiss them. Second, teachers are affected by the norm of 'equality' between colleagues (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016) as a consequence of Confucian values that put strong emphasis on group interdependence, mutual relationship (P. M. Nguyen et al., 2005; Phan & Locke, 2016), and socialist values of equality (T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016). As traditional culture does not encourage individual initiative, teachers tend to do the same as all the others. This traditional norm is further supported by an equal teacher appraisal and remuneration system. In terms of teacher appraisal, teachers nationwide are evaluated by centrally determined indicators which are quite general and incompatible with local and school features (Central Government, 2012b; MoET, 2018a). When making peer-reviews, for instance, teachers tend to give general feedback to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid conflict as much as possible (Phan & Locke, 2016). Means of teacher appraisal are teacher self-assessment, peer-review of teacher groups, and school leader's reviews (MoET, 2018a). In the matter of remuneration, most public schools apply a tenure-based pay system that discourages teachers from making further efforts (Hamano, 2008). In addition, as students' academic results are the key performance indicator of teachers as well as schools, teachers are rewarded when their students gain good results in academic testing and examinations. However, due to a limited budget, they mainly get praise from principals and only minimal monetary rewards (Hallinger et al., 2017; McAleavy et al., 2018)).

In respect of teacher participation, Vietnamese schools generally maintain a norm of shared decision making, which is named as mobilizing collective brainpower. Recent

national policies also support teacher empowerment and participation in school-level decisions (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016; D. T. Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017): however, principals still play a decisive role (Bui, 2013; Hallinger et al., 2017; D. T. Truong et al., 2017) and involvement in decision making is described as limited, formalistic and highly circumscribed (D. T. Truong, 2013). The primary underlying justification is a top-down approach in school management that has emphasized the central role of leaders as key decision-makers, whereas teachers regarded as implementers (Hallinger & Truong, 2014). Besides, hierarchical structure and harmony values inherited from Confucianism discourage teachers from publicly criticizing their leaders (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016; Phan & Locke, 2016; D. T. Truong et al., 2017). If teachers put forward their own opinions that are conflicted with those of leaders, they might be misconstrued as impolite or disrespectful (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016).

Regarding teacher professional development, the most popular forms are participating in training courses organized by universities or governing bodies. However, these training courses are offered to all teachers regardless of working experience or career stage (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). The quality of these training courses is also problematic where trainers tend to introduce theoretical knowledge rather than provide practical guidance for teachers (H. T. Nguyen, 2011), and the most common format is a one-way lecture (Saito et al., 2016). Another popular form of teacher professional development is teaching observation in which teachers are observed teaching in classrooms by colleagues or school principals twice per school year (N. H. Tran et al., 2018; McAleavy et al., 2018). However, teaching observation is not only for professional development but also for teacher monitoring where there are many unannounced visits (McAleavy et al., 2018). Evaluators tend to examine tangentially and scrutinize teachers' activities rather than observing teaching performance and students' learning. The follow-

up reflection seems to be a one-way discussion rather than a constructive exchange between the observed teacher and evaluators (Q. H. Pham & Roberts, 2012). In some schools, there are demonstration lessons in which other teachers can come and observe as a form of professional development (Hallinger et al., 2017). Some schools have recently experimented with lesson study, which is a form of teacher professional development that originated from Japan. Lesson study is a collaborative effort of teachers to develop a good lesson and learn from a collaboration and discussion process (Saito & Khong, 2012). However, low collegiality and low interest in responding and exchanging with colleagues are remarkable barriers to expanding this approach (Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Saito, Tsukui, & Tanaka, 2008). This practice might be attributed to a hierarchical value that respects higher rank and age (D. T. Truong et al., 2017). Teachers are not encouraged to show their knowledge to be better than senior or more experienced colleagues (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016). Next, being consistent with the norm of non-confrontation, teachers try not to criticize their colleagues in order to maintain harmonious relationships (D. T. Truong et al., 2017) and save face for colleagues (Phan & Locke, 2016).

A limited school budget is not able to cover professional development spending. To stimulate teachers to become involved in professional development activities, school principals only use small financial rewards given to individuals in public settings (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). This situation also reflects a collectivist norm in Vietnamese culture (N. H. Tran et al., 2018). The most popular motivational strategy employed by principals to encourage teachers' learning is inspiring the reward of spirit such as the improvement of students, the appreciation and respect of colleagues and parents and the self-improvement of teachers to become good examples for students. These intrinsic motivations reflect the Confucian value placed on the important role and high level of responsibility held by teachers in Vietnamese society (N. H. Tran et al., 2018).

School-Parent Relationship

Vietnamese parents have both power and obligation to support their children's academic success and play a dominant role in making decisions about matters relating to children's education. As Vietnamese culture maintains an honor of education and a fondness of learning, parents are willing to invest in children's education and even sacrifice for their children's academic success (Varbelow & Gee, 2018). Education expenses account for 4.3% in household consumption expenditure (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2012). Table 3 illustrates the average expenditure on education per schooling person in the past 12 months of 2012. In terms of school finance, socialization⁶ [*xã hội hoá giáo dục*] is one noticeable feature of school finance in Vietnam. Since government subsidy is limited, parents are essential financial contributors to schools (Bodewig et al., 2014). Schools commonly call for parent's financial contributions to improve school infrastructure or support co-curriculum activities. The PISA survey of principals in 2012 showed that 61% of respondents had contributed to fundraising for their local school in the previous school year, which was the highest among the participating countries and much higher than the average for OECD countries of 10% (OECD, 2013). Table 3 further illustrates that besides school fees, parents must spend a large amount of money on contributions to the school fund and other no-name expenses. On the negative side, many schools take the opportunity of socialization policy to collect more education fees that impose a financial burden on students' parents (London, 2011).

Table 3

⁶ The concept of socialization in Vietnam might be slightly different from other countries. In Vietnam, it refers to a cost-sharing mechanism between the state and community to public services like education (London, 2010). The state commits that it will maintain its primary role in funding education, while non-state provision is a supplementary source (National Assembly of Vietnam, 1990). It is argued that if community contributions could be mobilized in favorable areas, the state budget could efficiently support disadvantaged areas or concentrates on fulfilling long-term targets (Ta, 2014). However, the policy is criticized as a responsibility-shirking when the state shifts public education financing onto the household. It also reveals an inefficient tax system and a limited capacity in managing and distributing state funding of the government (London, 2010).

Average expense on education and training per schooling person in the 12 months of 2012 by areas (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2012). Unit: million Vietnam dong. Exchange rate: the US \$ 1 is equivalent to around 21,000 Vietnam dong.

	Total	By expenditure items						
		School fees	Contribution to school fund	Uniform	Textbook	Study tools	Extra class	Other expenses
Whole country	4,082.2	1,209.2	0,300.4	0,190.3	0,248.8	0,209.3	0,455.2	1,036.8
Urban area	6,352.4	2,066.6	0,440.6	0,241.9	0,309.0	0,245.9	0,855.0	1,312.0
Rural area	3,090.6	0,834.7	0,239.1	0,167.8	0,222.5	0,193.3	0,280.6	0,916.7

Previous studies of school management in Vietnam have not dealt much with the cooperation between schools and parents in educating students, the involvement of parents in school activities, and school accountability to parents. From the view of school principals, students' parents are one of the essential stakeholders that schools must maintain a good relationship with (Hallinger et al., 2017). School principals tended to keep open lines of communication with parents and try to share school values and visions with parents. At the classroom and the school level, parents can establish a representative Board of Students' Parents to reflect their views of educational issues to teachers and school managers (MoET, 2011b). Vietnamese parents also maintain frequent interactions with teachers and schools to discuss students' learning, and actively assist teachers with school activities (OECD, 2013). Although schools maintain a channel for accountability

to parents, the school-parent relationship is often dominated by teachers and school administrators as a result of respecting teachers and school education (Cobbe, 2011).

In contrast, parents have a weak influence on school management issues. Legally, the Board of Students' Parents has no official power to influence schools' decisions or monitor school performance. School councils are not required to include parents as members (MoET, 2011c) and this further limits their participation in school management. Practically, parents have little chance to formal involvement in school decisions (McAleavy et al., 2018). Schools are only accountable to parents for students' learning and performance, whereas accountability for school performance and management is not legally regulated. Moreover, low educational background and low family income are barriers to parents getting involved in school management (Hallinger et al., 2017). The tradition of respecting teachers also constraints parents from raising critical voices to school issues. According to the Law of Complaints, in case of dissatisfaction with schools, parents can only report to education governing bodies. (Bodewig et al., 2014).

In summary, school leadership and the work of teachers in Vietnamese public secondary schools have been greatly influenced by political directives as well as socio-cultural norms. In the context of dual lines of authority, Confucian culture heritage, and Western value adoption, school leadership has been bureaucratic, top-down, highly centralized, practice-based, and reluctant to change. For teachers, although public schools might be a desired workplace for stability, they must deal with challenges of low wages, reduced work motivation, and limited professional autonomy. These predominant features of school leadership and teachers roles have created a broader context for the exercise of school autonomy in practice, which will be analyzed in the following section.

School Autonomy in Public Secondary Schools

De Jure School Autonomy

This section introduces the extent of school autonomy in Vietnam which is regulated in current legal documents. Regarding the education curriculum, the government imposes a strongly centralized approach where MoET plays a key role in developing secondary education curriculum (Doan, 2005; London, 2011). In 2006, the government applied a revised secondary education curriculum, which provides standardized content of subjects for all schools nationwide. Localized content, which despite being decentralized to provincial DoET, takes up a tiny share (UNESCO, 2007). In addition, MoET is the only body that has authority in composing and publishing textbooks nationwide. Public schools must completely adopt curriculum and textbooks in all subjects without the right to selection or modification (T. H. Nguyen, 2017). DoET and BoET maintain regular inspections to check schools' adherence to MoET's regulations in most areas, especially teaching and learning following the national curriculum (Do et al., 2016).

Educational activities, which include academic learning and co-curricular activities, are also strictly regulated by the central government. MoET issues a curriculum framework [*Khung phân phối chương trình môn học*] which specifies the start and end time of every semester, learning schedule for lessons, formative and summative assessment, and general guidelines for teaching and learning methods. According to this general framework, DoET specializes into detail curriculum schedule [*Khung phân phối chương trình chi tiết*] for all public schools in that province (MoET, 2009b). Schools can propose to modify the detailed curriculum schedule if necessary, and the new schedule must be approved by DoET. Similarly, in terms of assessing students' learning performance, MoET issues general regulations on student assessment including types of

assessment, the process of assessment, methods to make a test, managing students' exam results, and student performance classification (MoET, 2011c). These legal frameworks could be further localized by DoET, then leaving the school some limited space for making modifications. However, the introduction of the new national general curriculum in 2018 is expected to bring more significant opportunities for schools to enjoy autonomy in academic issues which are now centrally controlled by the government, such as curriculum development and management or textbook selection.

In terms of financial management, recent documents have increasingly encouraged schools to exercise autonomy (Central Government, 2002, 2006, 2015). Currently, schools are classified into four categories ranging from full autonomy to no autonomy according to their financial capacity. In other words, the more expenditure that a school can cover from its own budget, the higher the autonomy it can enjoy (Central Government, 2015). For instance, fully self-financed schools are able to set their tuition fee according to market price as long as the fee is below the ceiling fee regulated by the Provincial People's Council⁷. In contrast, fully state-funded schools must completely comply with financial regulations introduced by governing bodies. For financial accountability, all schools must formulate a *school cost norm* [*Quy chế chi tiêu nội bộ*], which must be submitted to governing bodies and published to all school staff (Central Government, 2015).

Similarly, the extent of a school's autonomy in personnel management depends on its financial capacity (Central Government, 2015). Fully self-financed schools can enjoy autonomy in most critical areas of personnel management and are accountable to governing bodies for their decisions. For partially self-financed and fully state-funded

⁷. In general education, to ensure equity in education access, Provincial People's Council regulates the ceiling tuition fee based on the local socio-economic situation and people's affordability.

schools, the authority of personnel management is shared between governing bodies and schools. For instance, in the matter of teacher recruitment, fully self-financed schools can decide the number of employees and organize their selection process. In contrast, schools with lower autonomy cannot organize a selection and must receive teachers who are recruited by governing bodies.

De Facto School Autonomy

This section reviews the literature relating to the implementation of school autonomy policies and regulations in practice. As school autonomy has just emerged as an area of concern in recent years, the amount of trustworthy peer-reviewed literature is limited. While the researcher tries to review some Vietnamese studies, the findings of these empirical studies should be treated with great caution due to limitations on the conceptual framework and research design (Hallinger, Walker, & Gian, 2015).

First, very little is known about school autonomy in academic issues since Vietnam traditionally maintains a highly centralized curriculum and education schedule and schools and teachers have nearly no voice in curriculum development (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). The findings of Hallinger et al. (2017) show that principal autonomy over curriculum is explicitly limited. Although they could enjoy autonomy to adapt instructional methods and manage teaching schedule, the strict requirements of the national curriculum force them to monitor rather than coordinate, refine, adapt, or develop curriculum.

Second, as school autonomy in finance was earliest introduced in 2006 (Central Government, 2006), this topic has gained the highest interest of researchers. Most studies, which employ the case study method, are concerned with how state policies are implemented in practice (D. T. Nguyen, 2009; T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012; V. A. Nguyen, 2015). On the credit side, school principals and accountants of four secondary

schools reflected that their schools enjoy autonomy in distributing financial resources according to the school's specific needs and this policy has made positive impacts on the school's education quality (T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012). A case study of D. T. Nguyen (2009) reports that school autonomy in finance encouraged the school to use its budget more effectively and efficiently. Schools can control their budget better and have more authority to select appropriate service providers. School autonomy in finance also improves the financial management capacity of school principals and accountants. The study of Luong (2011) investigated how school autonomy has made changes in the education practice of high schools. Research findings show that school autonomy does not directly increase student performance, but it contributes to improving other factors relating to teaching and learning. Schools can have the authority to distribute financial resources to their priorities. For students, for example, schools pay more attention to providing co-curriculum activities to diversify students' educational experiences. For teachers, schools can arrange to fund for their teachers to participate in training courses or follow postgraduate education. School autonomy in finance allows schools to be more responsive to school needs like equipment purchase or teachers' pay. Previously, upper secondary schools had to go to DoET every month to get money to pay teachers. This procedure was inconvenient, and teachers generally received their salaries very late. Similarly, purchasing equipment was also difficult when schools only received a budget for this category in the last months of the fiscal year. Therefore, they had to quickly purchase items that might be unnecessary or low quality because if the school budget was not completely used, it must be returned to the state budget. Now schools can get the whole yearly budget from the beginning of the fiscal year and the budget for one year could be saved for the next year. Therefore, every decision relating to payment or purchase can be better planned and more responsive (Luong, 2011).

However, research results show some limitations in realizing school autonomy over finance. In terms of mobilizing resources, most public secondary schools, which are partially self-financing, have limited financial resources because they have no authority to set tuition fees (D. T. Nguyen, 2009; T. M. L. Nguyen & Tran, 2007) and the tuition fee cannot be higher than the ceiling regulated by the Provincial People's Council (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). Consequently, the school budget is just sufficient for regular expenses such as teachers' pay or small purchases and there is nearly no money saved for upgrading school infrastructure (H. T. Nguyen, 2011). Schools are forced to increase the number of students in one class as the only way to increase the school budget, which might impose stress on teaching and learning quality (D. T. Nguyen, 2009). However, V. A. Nguyen (2015) pointed out that school autonomy in setting tuition fees is not a fundamental problem. More importantly, these partially self-financed schools are very sluggish, for instance, they only collect fees that are regulated or instructed by governing bodies rather than find measures to exploit alternative resources from parents, community, and external supports. As most schools also do not pay attention to development or implementing a long-term financial plan, they become unable to cope with unexpected expenses. In short, the author concluded that schools do not effectively exercise their granted autonomy to mobilize and manage school resources effectively (V. A. Nguyen, 2015).

In terms of distributing financial resources, although schools can make their own decisions regarding school expenditure, all decisions must comply with specific and rigid cost norms issued by governing bodies (Hallinger et al., 2017; B. Le, 2010; T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012; V. A. Nguyen, 2015). These cost norms, which are unrelated to market prices and schools' needs, discourage school principals from finding effective management methods (T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012). In other words, schools do not

enjoy a real autonomy though shouldering more responsibility. Instead of being meant to obtain education objectives, school finance management is likely to end up being mainly focused on how to strictly conform with instructions and regulations from governing bodies V. A. Nguyen (2015).

School accountability in finance is another obstacle in exercising school autonomy. V. A. Nguyen (2015) found that most schools release financial reports about the state budget, whereas the non-state budget, which is less strictly controlled and of more concern to stakeholders, is rarely made public. Financial reports are not shared with parents, but with authorities and school teachers only. In addition, when the School Board has no real power in school structure, school accountability seems to be a vague mechanism, the author argued. B. Le (2010) and V. A. Nguyen (2015) assumed the following justifications underlying these shortcomings of school autonomy in finance. First, financial regulations, which are too specific, rigid, and inconsistent between governing bodies, deter schools from trying new approaches. Second, governing bodies are not willing to decentralize authority to the school level because increasing school autonomy means decreasing their role and power. Third, school principals are not fully aware of their authority and responsibility in financial management in the context of school autonomy. As a consequence of the previous centralized mechanism, school principals might be familiar with waiting for directions and regulations from higher governing bodies rather than being innovative in finance management.

Last, in terms of personnel management, current Vietnamese studies report that school principals support school autonomy in teacher recruitment (Hallinger et al., 2017; Luong, 2011; T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012). The interview data with principals show that previously schools had no voice in teacher recruitment, and they were compelled to receive teachers who were recruited by governing bodies regardless of whether the

teachers matched the school's needs (Luong, 2011). When schools have the authority to decide on teacher recruitment, principals are responsible for selecting the best candidates who meet the school's requirements because the decision has close links to the principal's reputation and the school's performance. Principals are also more active in devising staff plans, arranging teachers' work and organizing teachers' professional development activities. However, interview results with teachers show a contrasting view where they were not satisfied with school autonomy in teacher recruitment (Luong, 2011). Teachers doubt the principal's capacity and transparency to hold a fair selection process. It is reported that teachers who were recruited by school principals have made no more outstanding performances than those who were assigned by governing bodies. Some teachers suggested that teacher recruitment should not be decentralized to the school level because school people have no expertise and experience in this field. In granting school autonomy in selecting teachers, the principal should share authority with professional groups because the latter have profound expertise in the subject. Luong (2011) explained the barriers surrounding this situation. First, school principals lack skills and experience in recruiting teachers. Second, although schools can organize the selection process and make the final decision, they must comply with the general regulations of governing bodies. For instance, selection criteria are applied to all schools which leave no room for the school's specific requirements. Similarly, in terms of teacher dismissal, most partially self-financed schools cannot exercise their autonomy due to barriers from government regulations on labor (T. M. L. Nguyen & Do, 2012). To be more specific, schools cannot deliberately sack tenured teachers for weak performance because this decision is under the authority of governing bodies. Third, school autonomy in personnel must closely link to that in finance to make any remarkable changes. If schools only enjoy autonomy in teacher recruitment only, whereas the school budget is too low to allow improvement of

teachers' salary, school autonomy makes no sense to education improvement (Luong, 2011). In a case study of T. M. L. Nguyen & Do (2012), for instance, partially self-financed schools can only offer a small amount of reward which is insufficient to motivate teachers in their work.

In brief, there is a big gap between school autonomy in de jure and de facto. Although schools are granted some autonomy, they are not able to fully exercise their autonomy in practice for all sorts of reasons. The impacts of school autonomy on school practice seems to be very diverse and complicated, which justifies further investigation in this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlighted the most striking features of education and school management in Vietnam. Secondary education in Vietnam covers lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools. Although secondary education has gained significant accomplishments in terms of enrolment rate and school network expansion, the quality of secondary education remains a matter of concern. The state governance of secondary education at the central level includes the National Assembly, Central Government, MoET, and other ministries. At the provincial level, state governance of upper secondary education is the responsibility of the Provincial People's Council, Provincial People's Committee, DoET, DoF, and DoHA. At the district level, the district People's Council, district People's Committee, BoET, BoF, and BoHA all have responsibility for governing lower secondary education. The structure of governing bodies in education reflects a strong centralization in educational issues and some decentralization in relation to resources for education.

Teaching and learning in secondary schools in Vietnam are strongly affected by Confucian values. School education especially emphasizes respect and obedience in a

social order where teachers play a superior role in the educational processes. Students play a passive role and are not encouraged to question or criticize teachers and peers. Teaching and learning focus on factual knowledge presented in the textbook rather than constructive knowledge. Because the curriculum, textbooks, tests, and assessments are areas of strong centralization by MoET, teaching and learning in secondary schools place particular emphasis on covering textbook contents and preparing for the test. These features result in severe problems of private tutoring, academic fraud, and achievement syndrome. School leadership in public secondary schools is featured by a dual line of political and bureaucratic authority. The Central Communist Party has the most significant influence on all aspects of school management. Because public schools enjoy limited autonomy, school principals have limited room for making decisions and become dependent on governing bodies. School leaders try to keep a power distance with their subordinates and hold the absolute power in the school. They are likely to maintain harmony, stability, and solidarity within the school community. Teachers are highly respected in Vietnamese society but underpaid. Besides low salary, hard work and accountability pressure are factors contributing to decreasing their work motivation and job satisfaction. Their professional autonomy and school participation are very low. However, most teachers prefer working in public schools with a tenured position to secure permanent employment. In terms of school autonomy, the central Government regulates minimal autonomy in education while permitting higher autonomy in personnel and finance. However, current literature shows that there is a big gap between school autonomy in de jure and de facto. The scarcity of research on school autonomy in Vietnam urgently calls for further investigation. The following chapter describes the research design and methodology that were employed in this study to respond to research questions.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design utilized in this study, with specific emphasis on rationale for the qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology, the employment of methods of data collection and data analysis, and consideration of ethical issues.

The Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

Research approach (Creswell, 2014), or research strategy (Bryman, 2008) or strategies of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) are ‘plans and procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data of collection, analysis, and interpretation’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 3). To achieve the aim of this study and to address research questions, this study employs a qualitative research approach for the following reasons. Firstly, as the research questions of this study are concerned with the perception of school staff on school autonomy, qualitative research is the most appropriate approach as it reflects the world through the eyes of the participants under study rather than those of the researcher or other scholars (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In this study, the researcher strives for an understanding of how school staff view school autonomy, how they experience school autonomy’s impacts, and what is the meaning of those impacts on them personally (Merriam, 2016; Patton, 2015). In other words, this study employs a qualitative design in order to explore emic views on the impacts of school autonomy, and then to construct the researcher’s interpretations (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

Next, as the study aims to investigate the diverse impacts of school autonomy in de facto, it should be conducted in a setting where school autonomy naturally occurs

within a particular context and with complicating interactions (Patton, 2015). To gain this purpose, the use of a qualitative approach is suitable because it is mostly implemented in a natural setting without manipulating or controlling it (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Through intense and prolonged contact with people in the field, the researcher can collect naturally occurring data that closely reflects complex aspects of school autonomy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Moreover, as qualitative studies put emphasis on collecting word data rather than number or quantification (Bryman, 2008; Miles et al., 2014), qualitative research reports will provide a rich description of the phenomenon under study (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Last, as local studies show a lack of literature on school autonomy, the adoption of quantitative design, which is featured by the aim of theory verification and the employment of a tight theoretical framework and deductive reasoning, might be inappropriate. Besides, it was expected that school autonomy is a complicated issue in practice, and the investigation might lead to surprising findings. Hence, the use of qualitative research with an inductive strategy (Babbie, 2014; Bryman, 2008; Kerry, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) allows the researcher to follow an open, emergent, and flexible research design (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Krüger, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Using inductive reasoning, the researcher does not need to set a tightly prescribed research plan nor employ pre-formulated theoretical concepts, but she can gather data from the field first and generalize to concepts, patterns, categories, themes, or theoretical explanations later on. In short, an inductive strategy and

emergent design of qualitative research can be appropriate to explore a complex topic such as school autonomy.

Grounded Theory Appropriateness

Methodology refers to ‘a set of underlying principles, beliefs, and practices that constitute science itself’ (Kerry, 2007, p. 83). Researchers use methodology as a lens to view the world and make decisions on the study (Mills, 2014). Responding to the question of how we do research, methodology frames and guides the work of a study and provides justifications for choosing methods (Graue & Karabon, 2013). There are several explanations underlying the employment of grounded theory as the methodology in this study. First, the overarching aim of this study is not to verify a priori theory but to generate a substantive theory of the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of one school. The expected product of this study is a substantive theory of school autonomy that applies to a particular area of empirical inquiry from which it emerged (Glaser, 1967). Therefore, the grounded theory methodology is the most suitable because it is the only qualitative methodology that allows establishing hypothesis and theory emerged out of the data (Creswell, 2005).

Second, the research questions posed by this study suggest a need for grounded theory methodology. According to Hedrick, Bickman, & Rog (1993)’s taxonomy for categorizing qualitative research questions, this study poses impact research questions that are concerned with how school autonomy impacts on various aspects of a school. Merriam (2016) argued that grounded theory is particularly suitable for addressing research questions about how something changes over time. Thus, a grounded theory methodology would be useful to present diverse impacts of school autonomy in the changing situation of a specific school.

Third, as this study investigates a relatively new and complicated topic in the context of a developing country, grounded theory is a fit methodology because it is useful to explore social processes, concerns, and structures rather than personal issues (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013). More significantly, the grounded theory provides explicit, sequential, and flexible guidelines for unraveling such complicated and unstructured social reality and processes as school autonomy (Bryman, 1988; Charmaz, 2005). Grounded theory is one of the first qualitative methodologies which explicitly addresses the question of how to deal with research from the first day in the field to a finished written theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004). The ‘tried-and-true set of procedures’ of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 11) allows the researcher to investigate phenomena properly and to generalize theory in the substantive field (Charmaz, 2004, 2008; Punch, 2014; Strübing, 2011).

Fourth, although school autonomy has attracted widespread interest in the international literature, local scholars have paid little attention to this topic recently. Thus, current literature is insufficient to understand the features and impacts of school autonomy in Vietnam. According to Creswell (2013), grounded theory is particularly well suited when there is a lack of theory to explain a process or action. Thus, the employment of grounded theory methodology helps the researcher to generate a substantive theory that is able to fit or work in a substantive area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theory could be not only applied to one specific area and context but also carries potential implications to other contexts by the use of a constant comparative method to modify theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Last but not least, this study employs grounded theory methodology because of its never-ending process. As being one of the first qualitative studies in Vietnam that focuses on school autonomy, this study might be a starting point for further studies in the

substantive field. Since the characteristics and impacts of school autonomy might evolve, the adoption of grounded theory methodology allows the researcher to continually elaborate and modify theory whenever there is new knowledge (Corbin, 2015). As being readily modifiable, the theory generated from this study might become a ‘stepping stone’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 34) to investigating a more comprehensive formal theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 34).

The Context of the Study

Corbin & Strauss (2015) advised that data analysis should tightly attach to the context of study because ‘context not only grounds concepts but also minimizes the chances of distorting the meaning or misrepresenting intent’ (p. 70). Therefore, a full and accurate description of context is an essential step in analyzing data. This grounded theory study is conducted in one public secondary school located in a big city in Vietnam. The school, according to Stake (1995), is considered as an instrumental case to investigate school autonomy rather than to understand the school itself.

Gaining Accessing To the Field

One essential task before the beginning of the study was to obtain permission from a gatekeeper to access the field (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010). As the researcher had no contact with self-financed secondary schools, she asked an officer of the DoET for initial suggestions. The officer offered a list of public self-financed schools in the city. The researcher tried to contact several schools, but most of them were unwilling to join the study because gatekeepers were fearful of exposing their information. Of the three high schools that the researcher contacted, only one accepted to participate in this study. Green School (a pseudo name) is ideally fitted with the purpose of this study because it is one of the very few schools that is enjoying extensive autonomy in finance, academic and personnel issues. The principal of Green School agreed with the study plan and informed

consent form. Then we discussed the scope of work that the researcher can be involved in, for instance, activities to be observed or documents allowed to being collected. The principal assigned one vice-principal to support the researcher during the field trip. The vice-principal arranged for the researcher to meet several teachers for first interviews. Then, the researcher was free to make interviews and observations under consented terms and conditions.

Demographic Characteristics

School organization structure.

Green School is a public school established for 20 years and located in a big city in Vietnam. In the school year 2015-2016, there were about 2,000 students in both lower secondary education (Grade 6 to Grade 9) and upper secondary education (Grade 10 to Grade 12). There were about 160 teachers in the schools of which approximately 70% were holding at least a Master's degree, and there were many visiting teachers from universities and other high schools. Figure 3 illustrates Green School's organization structure that is mostly under national regulations (MoET, 2011a). First of all, the Communist Party leads the school to reach political goals. All the school's essential issues such as school strategic plan or annual plan must be submitted and approved by the Communist Party. In Green School, the school principal is also the Secretary of the Communist Party in the school.

There is a School Council that comprises school managers and representatives of teachers. The School Administration Board, which is accountable to the School Council, comprises one principal and two vice-principals, and is responsible for leading and managing the school. The principal assigns one of the vice-principals to manage professional issues such as teaching and learning, teacher development and internship

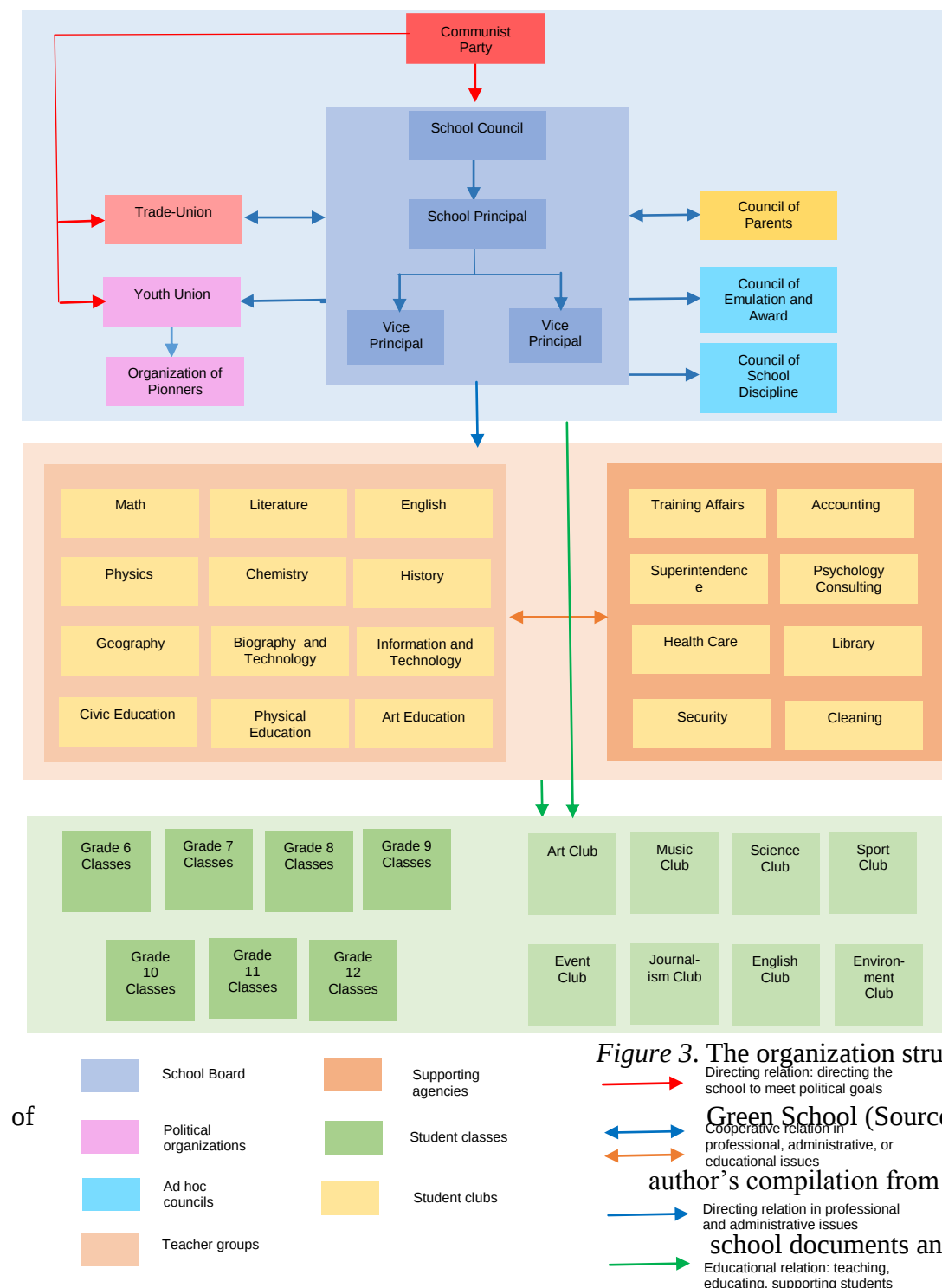
training, and the other one to manage supporting staff, students' co-curricular activities, and student clubs.

The Council of Parents comprises representative parents from classes to cooperate with the school in educating students (MoET, 2011b). Ad hoc councils such as the Council of Emulation and Award and the Council of School Discipline are established to consult and support the principal for a particular purpose such as granting awards or disciplining students or teachers.

Teachers in the Green School are organized into professional groups according to subjects. Each group is managed by one lead teacher who is fully responsible for professional and administrative issues in the scope of his or her group. Teacher professional groups are in cooperation with supporting bodies to educate and support students.

Supporting bodies are organized to best support the School Administration Board, teacher groups, and students. Supporting bodies are also important educational actors, closely cooperating with the teacher professional groups and homeroom teachers to educate students. Green School is one of a few public secondary schools that has a department that offers psychological consultation for students.

Homeroom teachers are responsible for supervising and supporting students by classes in order to meet educational objectives. These teachers work closely with subject teachers to manage students' academic performance, and with superintendents to supervise students' attitudes and school regulatory compliance.



Local governing bodies.

The management structure of Green School is more complicated than that of other public secondary schools, illustrated in Figure 4. Generally, the school is under the management of state governing bodies in terms of professional issues such as teaching

and learning, student assessment and educational activities. As the school covers both lower secondary level and upper secondary level, the former is managed by BoET while DoET manages the latter. Moreover, in terms of school management such as planning, organization structure and financing, the school is under the management of a pedagogic university. In other words, Green School can also be labeled as a laboratory school⁸ which provides internship training for student teachers of the pedagogic university and scientific research opportunities for the university faculty.

Figure 4. Governing bodies of Green School. (Source: author's compilation from school documents and field notes)

The Scope of School Autonomy

In terms of financial management, Green School is labeled as a public self-financed school. It means that Green School is still a public school but it has full autonomy in formulating budget plans and managing its budget. The school can also establish its cost norm, which is annually reviewed and modified, for all school activities.

⁸ Laboratory school or university affiliated school, which is pioneered by John Dewey, is both a secondary school where educate students and a university department where implements scientific research (Jacobs, 2010). In Vietnam, laboratory schools can be a place for training student teachers and experimenting the scientific projects of education universities or colleges (MoET, 2014b)

However, the school receives no funding or any financial subsidy from governing bodies, and the only source of school funding comes from tuition fees. The amount of tuition fee, which must be lower than the ceiling price regulated by the Provincial People Committee, is firstly proposed by Green School and then approved by the affiliated university. Besides, the school must annually contribute a certain amount of ‘administration fee’ to its affiliated university. Therefore, the meaning of public self-financed schools in Vietnam is mostly different from other similar public school models in international practice. Charter schools, academies, and independent public schools, for instance, can enjoy a high level of autonomy in finance while still gaining funding from the government.

Green School enjoys high autonomy in personnel management ranging from staff recruitment and discharge, appraisal and remuneration, to professional development. In other regular public schools, staff recruitment is conducted by governing bodies, and thus, most public schools have no voice in the selection process. In contrast, Green School has its recruitment policy and makes the selection by itself. Moreover, instead of applying a national teacher evaluation system, Green School can develop its own teacher evaluation system and remuneration policy.

Green School has greater autonomy than other public schools regarding academic issues. It is one of few public schools that enjoys autonomy in student admission. It has its admission policy that specifies admission requirements, selection criteria, and selection process. Green School was one of the first selected schools piloting school-based curriculum development since 2013. The school has the authority to develop its own school curriculum based on the national framework and curriculum. It also has greater autonomy than other public schools in organizing teaching and learning activities and student assessment.

In summary, while school autonomy has been a newly emerging concept in Vietnam, Green School is one of the first schools that enjoys significant autonomy in school management. In terms of financial management, the school is autonomous in balancing its budget, but it gains no funding from the state. It has greater autonomy in most aspects of personnel management and academic issues than regular public schools.

Method of Data Collection

The research method is defined as ‘specific tools or techniques used in collecting and generating data’ (Kerry, 2007, p. 84). Although grounded theory can work with any data (Glaser & Holton, 2004), this study focuses on gathering qualitative data. Glaser & Strauss (1967) noted that if a theory is developed based on only one mode of knowing, it could not fully explain the substantive area. Therefore, throughout a field trip lasting three months in spring and summer of 2016, this study adopted an interview and observational method to gather intensive and meaningful data in the field. The use of various methods of data collection is a typical characteristic of qualitative studies as well as grounded theory (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2015) because different kinds of data could generate more material for the construction of categories, hypotheses, and theories.

Interview

The interview method is defined as ‘a conversation that has a structure and a purpose’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 5). The research questions of this study concern the perception of participants of the impacts of school autonomy. Therefore, the employment of interview as a primary method is ideally suited because its significant advantage is providing rich and detailed data about people’s perspectives on topics under study (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Patton, 2015; Punch, 2014). Besides, as school autonomy is a complicated and sensitive topic in Vietnam, the use of the interview

method is most suitable because participants could have the freedom to express their personal views to the researcher (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Vos & Strydom, 2005).

This study employed semi-structured interviews because it enables the researcher to remain consistent with certain topics in all interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) while allowing flexibility and openness to new ideas. On the one hand, a certain control might keep the conversation focusing on the research topic and generate meaningful and useful data to obtain the goal of theory generation (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013). On the other hand, as every person defines the world and interprets events in a unique way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a less-structured format allows the researcher to investigate the concept of school autonomy from different points of view. Therefore, an interview protocol includes a structured section, which covers general topics to unfold the interviewees' emic view about their experience with school autonomy. This structured section is followed by a list of questions that might be tailored to each interviewee according to their responses (Creswell, 2013). For example, when the researcher realizes that the interviewee could have intensive expertise on a specific theme, further questions will be posed to investigate his or her response more profoundly.

Because the researcher has limited working experience in secondary schools, the semi-structured design allows her to respond to unplanned situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Vos & Strydom, 2005). For instance, when the researcher identifies a promising concept emerging from the interview, she can follow-up immediately or seek further clarification. Thus, the wording and order of questions are not predetermined (Merriam, 2002) to encourage participants to feel free to add any relevant information relating to the topic and raise any new issues that the researcher has not anticipated (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Questions play a crucial role in interviewing as good questions can result in meaningful data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, most interview questions are open-ended, general, and focused on delving into the emic view (Creswell, 2013). The use of open-ended questions enables the researcher to gain spontaneous response that might best reflect the mind of the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). At the beginning of an interview, the first questions are generally neutral, gathering descriptive information about the experience of participants when working in the school. The following questions more deeply explore their perceptions and values to unravel the characteristics and specific impacts of school autonomy on the school and the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A critical requirement of interviewing in grounded theory is to avoid forcing interview data into pre-conceived concepts (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This requirement poses a significant challenge to the researcher on raising questions. The researcher only utilized a prompting and probing technique in essential questions and with a deliberate and careful manner because the more these techniques are used, the higher the risk of bias to interview data (Fowler, 2009). Prompting refers to the researcher's encouragement to produce participant's answers, while probing is a follow-up questioning technique to get a more detailed response (Patton, 2015). When using prompting and probing, the researcher tries not to put any pressure on participants and always respects ethical principles. She prompted by merely repeating the question or slightly rephrasing it, whereas the probe was expressed in as neutral and straightforward way as possible.

The researcher had estimated several difficulties and barriers when doing interviews. For most interviewees, school autonomy would be a complicated and sensitive topic because it might link to school budget and personnel management areas,

which are less widely discussed by teachers. Moreover, as Vietnamese culture avoids criticism or conflict and is particularly concerned with personal reputation, interviewees might not feel free to share their thoughts. The researcher understood that the relationship between interviewer and interviewees might remarkably affect the quality of the interview data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). When there is trust and honesty in the researcher's approach, people might share their information more comfortably and honestly. The researcher had no previous relationship with any school member; thus, she tried to build rapport with the school members via frequent presence at school events and personal conversations. Before starting interviews, the researcher spent one month of observation to capture an overview of the school and build trust with school teachers. At this stage, these activities aimed to not only introduce the study to school people, develop connections and trust with them, but also enabled the researcher to identify potential key informants (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Although efforts towards building trust were maintained continuously during the field trip, the researcher avoided 'going native' in order to evaluate data objectively.

This study encompassed 27 interviews with school teachers and managers. One participant left the interview early as she felt the topic was too sensitive and complex for her. The length of each interview was approximately 30-45 minutes. All were recorded with the agreement of interviewees and transcribed by the researcher. A great benefit of transcribing by the researcher was increasing familiarity with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and inspiring analytical ideas along the way. Because all interviewees are working in the same school, this study will not provide descriptions of the interviewees to secure their personal information and identity.

Despite being a primary method of qualitative data collection, the interview method has several limitations, and the researcher made constant efforts to minimize them. Roller & Lavrakas (2015) warned about the potential bias from interview data due to the interviewer-interviewee relationship. The researcher knows very well that bias may occur if too much information is provided to participants. Therefore, in all preliminary communications, the researcher only introduced the necessary basic information of the study such as the purpose and ethical principles. The researcher also avoided presenting the etic view to the issues under study, even when participant requests it, with the aim of keeping the participants' views fresh and unbiased. Besides, the interview method is quite time-consuming to arrange, conduct, and transcribe (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the researcher always strictly followed the principles of the research method and ethical considerations to gain meaningful data as well as secure participants' confidentiality.

Observation

Observation is the act of investigating a phenomenon, recording it in the field setting, and using all five senses of the researchers (Angrosino, 2007). This method is attributed to the assumption that deeper values and perceptions of people are expressed via their purposeful behavior (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In this study, observation was employed as one primary method of data collection because it was conducted in the natural setting where the phenomenon is occurring (Kerry, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observations in this study were mainly made at school meetings, teacher meetings, and teacher training sessions. The mobilization of all five senses helped the researcher gain in-depth understanding of social, emotional and cultural factors that shape the context of school community as well as the perception and behaviors of school members (Kerry, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Neuman, 2014; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Simpson & Tuson, 2003). Second, when using this reality-

based method, the researcher can collect the most naturally immediate response of participants in situ (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015), which can be more credible than ‘secondhand account’ gathered from the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137).

This grounded theory study employed unstructured non-participant observation method. The role of the researcher was as a completely unobtrusive observer who overtly appears onsite, detaches from groups, and maintains no interaction with participants (Creswell, 2013; Gold, 1958). This method minimizes biases and intervention of the researcher to the situations and the participants can respond naturally while the researcher is an outsider to the groups (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Vos & Strydom, 2005). Besides, the unstructured, open-ended design allows the researcher to focus on situations emerging in reality, rather than pre-conceived constructs, to comprehend better naturally unfolded insights (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2014). On the other side, although the role of the total observer could be more objective in observing situations, it might reduce the richness of data and the researcher must be more careful in inference (Thyer, 2011).

The fieldwork in general and the observation method in particular were conducted in a setting unfamiliar to the researcher. This situation might have been an advantage since all events and interactions were observed with a fresh and curious mind without any predetermined concepts. However, the researcher conceived that bias might occur when participants provided information insufficiently or inaccurately (Seale, Gobo, & Gubrium, 2007). Thus, in the first phase of the field trip, the researcher primarily employed the observation method in order to obtain first impressions without any interaction with participants. Since the second month of the field trip, when the researcher had captured an overview of the school and developed a relationship with some key informants, she posed several questions to participants to validate data after the observation.

26 observations are recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Field notes are also available for all observations in order to provide concrete, rich, and non-judgmental descriptions of the events as well as reflective notes about experiences and interpretations of the researcher (Angrosino, 2007; Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2014). A set of field notes includes handwritten notes made in situ, expanded notes made as soon as possible after the observations, and journal notes to record the whole fieldwork process.

There are some potential drawbacks accompanying the observation method. It is unavoidable biased and selective since it depends on the opportunity to observe (Cohen, 2011). In fact, for the confidentiality reason, the researcher could only gain access to public events such as meetings, professional development activities, and workshops, while she could not observe meetings related to financial issues or teacher appraisal. Moreover, the overt presence of the researcher might have been a disadvantage because participants might respond differently from usual, rendering the observational data biased and unreliable (Vos & Strydom, 2005).

Method of Data Analysis

This study employed the grounded theory of Corbin & Strauss (1990) as a method of data analysis because it can help the researcher to follow the right direction and ‘avoid drowning in the data’ (Kelle, 2007, p. 211).

Coding

Coding, which is the act of assigning code labels to the data (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015), is a fundamental step in the analytical process of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Because this grounded theory study employed the systematic design of Corbin & Strauss (1990) and Strauss & Corbin (1998), the coding process involved three steps of open, axial, and selective coding.

Open coding. The first phase of data analysis is open coding that generates the primary form of code. Open coding in grounded theory is slightly different from first cycle coding in other qualitative studies since the former strongly aims to conceptualize data and to form categories and their properties. Open coding is embarked on after the first observation and continued simultaneously to data collection throughout the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After every observation or interview, the researcher analytically broke down data into small pieces in order to examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Firstly, all data was subject to intense scrutiny, and then concepts were assigned to relevant pieces of data (Strauss, 1987).

Subsequently, the researcher compared concepts and grouped them into categories. Categories are the higher level of conceptual abstraction than concepts, and they present as ‘conceptual element of theory’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 36). If concepts can be easily identified by a close examination of data, the establishment of categories is more complicated. Categories have to capture the general idea covering current concepts on the one hand and orient towards theory generation on the other hand. Categories do not arise from merely merging similar concepts and labeling a new heading (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). For example, concepts ‘school requirements’, ‘administrative tasks’, and ‘maintaining relationship with parents’ are grouped to form the category ‘challenges to teachers’. The final product of open coding is a set of categories and their concepts.

Axial coding. When categories and concepts are identified, the next stage of coding aims to look for possible relationships among categories in the data. Axial coding means building ‘a dense texture of relationship around the axis of a category’ (Strauss, 1987, p. 64). In axial coding, the emphasis is placed on the arrangement of categories into

a coding paradigm (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As Creswell (2013) explained, the typical feature of axial coding is to show the interconnectedness of categories. The coding paradigm is a standard tool of systematic grounded theory design. It is a refined framework that guides the theoretical coding process when the research answers questions when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, it enables the researcher to think systematically about the data and to relate them in a comprehensive way (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To examine potential relationships among categories, they are classified to core phenomenon (the central category), causal conditions (factors that influence the core phenomenon), context (specific situational factors that influence strategies), intervening conditions (general situational factors that influence strategies), strategies (the specific actions or interactions that result from the core phenomenon), and consequences of the action and interaction. For example, this study identified ‘school autonomy’ as a core category, and ‘performance-based pay’ is recognized as a strategy resulting from the core category.

Selective coding. When a core category is identified, and the relationship between the core category and others is developed, the coding process moves to identify a storyline that integrates the categories (Cohen et al., 2011). Selective coding means code selection where the researcher refines codes to only codes relating to the core category and its relationships (Strauss, 1987). The output of this stage is a storyline that represents propositions of categories in the axial coding paradigm (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

During selective coding, the researcher continued to collect and analyze data but paid more attention to the core category of theory. Strauss (1987) suggested that selective coding can begin from the early phase of the study, and the core category becomes a guide for theoretical sampling and data collection. In January 2018, the researcher conducted another interview to collect further data. This further data collection helped the

researcher check out the theory with new data to confirm theoretical explanations. In this phase, the coding scheme was compared with pre-existing literature (Cohen et al., 2011; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014) to add more ideas for consideration and to understand the new substantive theory in a broader context.

Memos

This study employed memos as one central element of grounded theory methodology is the engagement with an extensive and systematic memo in the whole data analysis process (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Memos are ‘theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories’ (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 61) and memoing is the process of producing memos. There are many apparent advantages of writing memos in this grounded theory study. Being an essentially reflexive document on theory evolvment (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), memos are written to record analytical insights during the theory-building process (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). More than a documentation tool, memo writing facilitates the researcher in systematically raising data to the conceptual level, developing properties, filling out categories, exploring potential connections between categories and integrating them into theory (Bryman, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). Memoing might drive subsequent data gathering into being more theory-oriented (Charmaz, 2006). When the theory emerges, the researcher can use memos to locate theory with other priority ones to identify gaps and compare their relevance (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Practically, by writing memos throughout the analysis process, the researcher always keeps engaged in data (Charmaz, 2006; Lempert, 2007) and does not lose track of thinking (Bryman, 2008).

In the present study, memoing was begun as soon as the first data collection and was continued throughout the theory generation until the final written report (Miles et al.,

2014). The researcher employed three types of memo, namely code memos, theoretical memos, and operational memos (Pandit, 1996). Code memos were used during open coding in order to capture concepts as well as construct categories and their properties. Theoretical memos were mainly used during axial and selective coding with a view to track the evolution of theory, especially the arrangement of categories into a coding paradigm. Operational memos or methodological notes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) are used during the analytical process in order to record decisions regarding research design. Whenever memo ideas occurred, even while the researcher was coding, sorting, comparing, or writing, she stopped for a while to grab the analytical ideas into memos (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Holton, 2004). As the researcher wrote memos for herself, the form of memo was very diverse like paragraph, list, question, or diagram.

Constant comparative method

The constant comparative method resides at the core of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Slices of data are constantly compared to result in an integrated and systematic theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison was employed in this study because if the researcher constantly interacts with data during the theory generation process, the grounded theory will be more precise, consistent, and tightly fitted to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In this study, the researcher constantly looks for similarities and differences between segments of data in one transcript, between data of one method, and between data of different methods. This comparison enables the researcher to recognize possible properties of a given category and the potential relationship between categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Kelle, 2007). The ultimate purpose of comparing these slices of data is not to test each other but to integrate data into a theory.

When engaging in constant comparison, both interview and observation data are treated equally and supplementary (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison avoids the researcher becoming biased by focusing on one mode of knowing and ignoring other sources (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For instance, the researcher realized that Interviewee #23 tended to overrate her performance and the school. Thus, this interview dataset was treated with special consideration to avoid biased results, and constant comparison enabled the researcher to examine the accuracy and trustworthiness of this data.

Ethical Considerations

One fundamental requirement of conducting research is strict compliance with not only scientific standards but also ethical principles (Kvale, 1996). Research ethics refer to a set of ethical principles to guide researchers in doing research (R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This section explains ethical considerations underlying every decision throughout the study, from data collection, data analysis, to writing reports.

Informed Consent

The standard of informed consent requires that participants have the right to know all essential information about the study and their involvement in the study (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Ryen, 2007). The informed consent form used in this study explicitly stated the purpose of the study, the scope of the investigation, ethical principles, safeguard to participant's confidentiality and the use of data (see Appendix 1).

When contacting the gatekeeper to gain access to the field, the researcher fully introduced the necessary information of the study via an informed consent form and a detailed study plan (Mertens, 2010; Punch, 2014). The researcher and the gatekeeper also discussed and narrowed the scope of work that the researcher could be involved in, for instance, the information or type of document that could be accessed or school activities that could be observed. In addition, as using a qualitative approach whose design is

exploratory and emergent, the researcher timely notified the gatekeeper about significant revisions in the research design and the scope of work in order to gain her consensus. For instance, when the category ‘Learning organization’, which was not mentioned in the initial study plan, was emerging, the researcher discussed with the gatekeeper to notify her of this change and request access to available documents relating to this theme.

For observation, informed consent by a written form signed by all participants is not available. However, as this study employed overt observation, all participants knew that they were being observed (Cohen et al., 2011) when the gatekeeper informed school members about the study and the presence of the researcher. For the interviews, potential participants were prior contacted via phone, and they only met the researcher and participated in the study based on voluntary and full understanding (Babbie, 2014; Cohen et al., 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kerry, 2007; Punch, 2014; Ryen, 2007). Before interviewing, the researcher explained ethical research issues once again and recordings were only made with the agreement of participants. Before and after every interview, the researcher was also willing to answer participants’ inquiries about the study.

To conduct an ethical study, the researcher did not use any deception in data collection. Deception means deliberately withholding or misrepresenting information of the study to gain participation agreement (R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Deception at some degree might increase the chance of involving a research subject into the study and decrease the risk of a change in a participant’s response invalidating the study (Babbie, 2014; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Thyer, 2001). The researcher maintained to provide full disclosure of the study to the participants and respect the voluntary participation of the research subjects (Creswell, 2014; Neuman, 2014).

One application of the informed consent principle is that participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005; Kerry, 2007; Punch, 2014; Ryen, 2007; Vos & Strydom, 2005). One interviewee withdrawn from participation when the interview had just begun a few minutes because she felt uncomfortable with answering questions relating to personal experience with the school. She allowed the researcher to use her response for data analysis.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality refers to ‘the handling of information in a confidential manner’ (Vos & Strydom, 2005, p. 61). Safeguarding participants’ confidentiality was set as the central issue of ethical consideration in this study for several reasons. First, the research topic of school autonomy is quite sensitive in the context of Vietnam (as an example of this, two of three schools refused to participate in the study). Without a shield of strict confidentiality, participants were not willing to share their views because some information might influence their colleagues, managers, or governing bodies. Second, as this study was conducted in only one school, people in the same community might easily guess participants’ identities if there were any negligence in research practice (Kerry, 2007; Punch, 2014). Hence, the researcher made constant efforts to protect the location of the study and participant’s privacy in order to avoid potential harm or disadvantages to them (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Christians, 2005; Creswell, 2014; Ryen, 2007).

A variety of techniques were employed to assure confidentiality and minimize the risk of accidental exposure (Babbie, 2014; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Neuman, 2014; Punch, 2014). The researcher is the only one who knows the information about school and the participants. The school was assigned a pseudonym, and its demographic information was blurred. Interviewed participants’ names were assigned a numerical identifier, and observed participant’s names were given anonymity. All personal data of participants such as their subject, years of experience and job title were secured and not

revealed publicly, to ensure that they could not be deduced and identified. The information of people who were mentioned in interviews, observations, and documents was blurred to minimize the potential risks of non-confidentiality.

The Relationship between the Researcher and Participants

As the field of study was conducted over three months, the researcher attempted as much as possible not to disrupt the field and intrude into participants' daily life (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2014). The researcher built rapport with participants and maintained a respectful relationship with them (Kerry, 2007). The researcher also respected participants' values and difference as well as the school community's norms and customs (Creswell, 2014). Throughout the study, the researcher attempted to avoid exploitation of participants and put the well-being of participants as the priority (Creswell, 2014). Participants could stop the interview whenever they felt unavailable for conversation, for instance, Interviewee #8. For Interviewees #3 and #6, as they made lengthy responses in the first interview, the researcher suggested taking a break and continued the interviews on another day to safeguard their physical health.

The Use of Data

Both digital data (transcriptions, reflexive journal, audio recordings, photos, MAXQDA analysis and its associated files such as memos) and paper-based data (field notes, memos) were stored securely. To maintain security and originality, the researcher kept original files and documents separately from working files.

As the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, she was aware an ethical problem that the researcher might filter data through personal bias or force the data into pre-conceived concepts (Merriam, 2002). Hence, the researcher analyzed data and wrote up reports with careful deliberation to avoid research misconduct such as the fabrication or falsification of data (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Christians,

2005; Creswell, 2014; R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Every interpretation or quotation was introduced with a link to an accurate source of information. Research findings were introduced fully and honestly, without bias to expose only positive results (Creswell, 2014).

Chapter Summary

To respond to research questions, this study employed a qualitative approach because it helps the researcher to dive into the world of the participants and understand their views. Because this study aims to generate a substantive theory on the impacts of school autonomy, it employed a grounded theory methodology. This grounded theory study was conducted in one public self-financed secondary school in Vietnam. The selected school enjoys an extensive autonomy in education, personnel, and finance. Two methods of data collection used in this study were interview and observation. The idea of Corbin & Strauss (1990) was employed as the method of data analysis in this study. The process of coding, the use of memos and constant comparative method have been fully described in this chapter. To ensure ethical principles, this study was especially concerned with issues of informed consent, confidentiality, the relationship between the researcher and participants, and the use of research data. The next chapter presents an analysis of the data gathered through the methodological process described and justified in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Introduction

The following chapter will present research findings based on a thorough analysis of the data collected from 27 interviews with school members and 26 observations in the Green School. Common primary themes emerged from the data contribute to establishing hypotheses on the impacts of school autonomy on a public school. An examination of various data sources has emerged four primary themes, namely school-based curriculum, performance-based pay, teachers, and school values.

Theme 1. School-Based Curriculum

This section introduces data regarding how school members perceive the impact of school autonomy on school curriculum and educational activities. Three major properties emerge from an investigation of the data: namely school innovations within national and local frames, school strategies to implement a school-based curriculum, and barriers to the school-based curriculum.

School Innovations within Frames

Basic program – ‘We are not able to go beyond the frames’.

When being asked about school autonomy in the academic sphere, all interviewees mentioned school-based curriculum development as the most typical example. At first, interviewees tended to describe school-based curriculum under a broader context of national and local frames:

MoET promulgates national learning outcomes and a general curriculum framework. Then DoET localizes to a specific framework which arranges the learning content into a schedule. In general, there is one national framework of the MoET and a specific framework of the DoET, and then the school’s learning content. We are not able to go beyond the frames but must comply with them.

You cannot remove all learning content. For instance, when we develop one topic, it must both respond to innovation requirements and cover the required learning content of MoET (O. 5: 390-400⁹).

This paragraph should be explained in the Vietnamese context. As previously mentioned, at the national level, MoET maintains a unified national curriculum to ensure that all students can meet national standard learning outcomes. Based on this national one, local governing bodies like the DoET and BoET issue local specific frames to all secondary schools in the area. ‘We are not able to go beyond the frames but must comply with them’ means that although being labeled as one of the first schools enjoying school autonomy in curriculum development, Green School enjoys minimal autonomy due to barriers from both national and local frames. Therefore, the school cannot develop or adopt a brand-new curriculum but can only engage in ‘modifying, supplementing, updating, and renewing the whole or some parts of the national curriculum’ (O. 17: 185-186). In fact, ‘school-based curriculum reserves approximately 80% of the national curriculum’ (I. 20: 88-89¹⁰) and the difference between the two curriculums is ‘unnoticeable’ (I. 24: 183). In terms of curriculum structure and learning content, for example, interviewee made comparisons:

You must always comply with the MoET’s curriculum. You can develop learning content into topics or merge similar lessons or content into topics. Important learning content can be expanded, whereas unnecessary ones can be removed or reduced. But you must be consistent with the MoET’s framework (I. 6: 497-501). This [school-based curriculum] is not a brand-new curriculum, but was developed based on the national curriculum. We modify it [the national curriculum] to

⁹ The verbatim is quoted from Observation #5, line 390-400

¹⁰ The verbatim is quoted from Interview #20, line 88-89

conduct teaching and learning more feasibly. With the same learning content, we just rearrange it to be suitable for our orientations and ideas (I. 7: 89-92).

There is a general curriculum framework. For instance, if you teach about the types of a triangle, you could change approaches, but you must introduce three types, the equilateral, isosceles, and scalene. You can add other cases but you cannot remove this content. In other words, you must retain at least these learning objectives. ... Nevertheless, you cannot set too many objectives. If you add more objectives [outside the framework], you must explain why you did so, and what you added that objective for (I. 9: 243-250)

The school-based curriculum is under the MoET's framework, but we merge lessons into learning topics. We can cut some parts, add some parts, but finally, the curriculum must assure that students can attain education objectives [regulated by MoET] (I. 19: 201-203).

We just restructure it to make it [national curriculum] more appropriate, but core learning content remains as in the textbook and MoET's curriculum (I. 23: 4-5)

Generally, there is no remarkable difference in terms of knowledge and learning content but time allocation. For example, teachers might reallocate time for important content (I. 24: 183-185).

In terms of curriculum structure, it could be argued that Green School can only merge lessons into learning topics to 'conduct teaching and learning more feasibly.' Instead of delivering knowledge through separate lessons, Green School introduced it by learning topics to link relevant bodies of knowledge. In addition, teachers can expand important learning content and remove or reduce unnecessary content. Time allocation was also changed accordingly; for example, essential topics are allocated more teaching and learning time. Substantial changes in curriculum, if any, must be fully accountable to

higher governing bodies ‘you must explain why you did so, and what you added that objective for.’ During interviews, most interviewees strongly emphasized the requirement of maintaining MoET’s core learning content in the school-based curriculum such as ‘you must always comply with the MoET’s curriculum’, ‘you must be consistent with the MoET’s framework’, ‘but finally the curriculum must assure that’. One might argue that the school-based curriculum seems to be ‘old wine in new bottles’ when ‘core learning content remains in the textbook and the MoET’s curriculum.’ However, when taking into account the context of highly centralized education in Vietnam and Green School as a first-time participant in the school-based curriculum, these initial changes are somewhat reasonable and could be the first step toward more substantial changes.

Second, interview data further showed that the extent of restructuring learning content varies between subjects. One mathematics teacher reported:

There are differences between subjects. For example, in history, they [history teachers] can remove this lesson and add another one, which is more suitable for our school students. Similarly, in geography, and civic education. For mathematics, however, because of its strong logic, we are not able to remove or add anything because it must be rationalized. It is different from other subjects. Generally, mathematics in our curriculum covers most learning content in the national curriculum. We do not remove anything but just add some content. Of course, we reduced some learning content like overlapping parts, for example, those that students learned previously will not have them repeated (I. 1: 42-50)

According to this response, the most remarkable modifications were observed in subjects such as geography, history, and civic education, whereas mathematics maintained most learning content from the national curriculum. The interviewee explained that because mathematics is characterized by strong logic, teachers could not

easily modify learning content. However, another underlying explanation might relate to the influence of high-stakes exams on school autonomy in curriculum development. For subjects that are not included in high-stakes exams, the school and teachers have less pressure regarding teaching to the test and thus have greater autonomy to modify learning content. In contrast, for ‘key subjects’ in high-stakes exams like mathematics and literature, the school must maintain most learning content in the national curriculum because of a concern that the removed content might be tested.

Initial improvements.

Although Green School enjoys limited autonomy in curriculum development, research data found some positive improvements in the curriculum as well as teaching and learning practice. First, when restructuring the national curriculum, teachers could remove unfeasible objectives to focus on the core objectives only. One teacher observed:

There is a big gap between learning objectives set by the MoET and students’ acquisition capacity. The MoET sets too many objectives, whereas students’ capacity is limited. Thus, we purposefully remove some learning objectives to make students acquire knowledge more efficiently. If I try to meet all learning objectives, teaching and learning come back to chalk and talk, and education innovation gains no value’ (I. 22: 107-111).

In this response, the interviewee was likely to criticize the current top-down approach in which MoET’s experts, researchers, and educators play a crucial role in curriculum development whereas teachers and practitioners can only contribute a weak voice. Therefore, MoET’s national curriculum was identified as unsuitable to teaching and learning practice since it set too many learning objectives and content overwhelming to students’ abilities. The interviewee reported that if teachers try to maintain all learning content listed by the national curriculum, ‘teaching and learning comes back to chalk and

talk and education innovation gains no value.’ This means that with the current national curriculum, teachers cannot apply education innovations but maintain traditional teaching methods like chalk and talk. However, interviewees recognized that the new school-based curriculum had overcome these shortcomings:

Restructuring learning content is definitely more effective than keeping to the previous curriculum. It removes the unessential part and focuses on crucial knowledge only (I. 11: 81-82).

Unnecessary parts, which are no longer appropriate, are removed or reduced.

Essential parts, which might be appropriate to our students – Green School’s students, are given an emphasis. For example, we offer learning content that fits the typical feature of students in this city. I think it would be more suitable (I. 14: 107-110).

The school’s curriculum is based on the MoET’s curriculum. According to school features and students’ capacity, we take consideration of which parts are suitable or unsuitable, which parts should be increased or decreased. ... Topics that are unsuitable or strange to students are removed and replaced by other suitable ones (I. 18: 183-188).

It could be seen that the school-based curriculum allowed teachers to remove or reduce unnecessary learning content and introduce topics that are more appropriate for the school students. These interviewees reflected that ‘we offer learning content that fits the typical features of students in this city,’ ‘essential parts, which might be appropriate with our students – Green School’s students, are given an emphasis,’ ‘according to school features and students’ capacity.’ This means that teachers did not make curriculum modifications based on their subjective intentions but on the characteristics of the school

and its students. They expected to create curriculum changes that were more appropriate to their students' needs.

Second, the interviewee reported that the school-based curriculum created more time and flexibility for teachers to implement teaching and learning innovations. They clarified this as follow:

It [school-based curriculum] is more advantageous. Because the curriculum is reconstructed according to our intentions, we make it [school-based curriculum] systematically. Similar lessons are merged into topics instead of being separate, and teaching lessons is less time-wasting (I. 8: 9-11).

It [school-based curriculum] facilitates teachers to focus more [on essential content] and implement innovative ideas (I. 11: 83-84).

It is very beneficial when a school-based curriculum arranges learning content into learning topics because fewer topics will reduce the pressure on teaching to meet the schedules. Beforehand I had to finish one lesson in one session. Now I can deliver that lesson in two sessions to make sure that students can thoroughly understand the learning content. In contrast, many short lessons are unnecessary to teach in one session. Thus, the long and short lessons can make up for each other. It is advantageous when students have more time to practice skills (I. 6: 475-482). Instead of teaching separate lessons in separate sessions, we can introduce them by topics, as long as we are complying with the MoET's national learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers enjoy a more active and flexible space in teaching and learning. For instance, there is lesson 1, 2, and 3 in one topic. For a particular body of knowledge of the topic, teachers could introduce lesson 2 first, then lesson 1 and 3. It means teachers enjoy full autonomy in this field to introduce

lessons to attain the best quality. They are also active in selecting reference materials (O. 5: 102-107).

It is explained that the current national curriculum frame tightly regulates the teaching and learning schedule, for instance, a specific lesson is regulated to be delivered on a fixed week and date and teachers must fully comply with it. Moreover, all lessons are allocated the same amount of time, regardless of the complexity or importance of the knowledge. This regulation could be a disadvantage when long lessons or crucial learning content is allocated the same amount of time as short lessons or less essential content. Thanks to restructuring learning content into learning topics, teachers have less stress from time-constraints since they enjoy extensive autonomy to allocate classroom time. Most interviewees left many positive comments to this change, such as ‘more advantageous,’ ‘less time-consuming,’ ‘very beneficial,’ ‘very effective.’ They further illustrated how school-based curriculum changed their classroom practice:

When applying a complex teaching and learning technique, time-constraints have been no longer a problem. With a school-based curriculum, we can realize all our ideas (O. 2: 195-197).

One problem was time-limitations. With 45 minutes¹¹, we can only finish one task, for instance, students can only make notes on the tablecloth, but they do not have enough time to make a presentation and for teachers to deliver comments. ... Now we are applying the school-based curriculum with learning topics that can be introduced not only in one session but several. Therefore, teachers can arrange one or two sessions for students’ presentations (O. 2: 59-63 ... 175-179).

The change here is we do not have to strictly conform to the national schedule. It seems that teachers are ‘untied.’ We can use more new techniques and methods.

¹¹ In secondary schools, one session is delivered in 45 minutes

Students are possibly excited. Because we are ‘untied’ from time-limitations, we can do those things (I. 14: 102-105).

These responses provided examples of how a school-based curriculum facilitates innovations in teaching and learning practice. As teachers enjoy more flexibility in allocating classroom time, they can invest more time in crucial learning content or experiment with various teaching and learning methods. Like the case of the teacher in Observation #2, if it is the national curriculum, she must introduce every lesson in separate sessions, which might be challenging for implementing project-based learning. With the school-based curriculum, when learning content is restructured into topics, she arranged one session for introducing the essential content of that topic and brainstormed on a learning project, then held other sessions for teamwork, student presentations, and teachers’ reflections. Although research data may be somewhat limited to confirm whether these new teaching and learning methods are better than traditional ones, it is clear that the school-based curriculum creates more flexibility for teachers and encourages them to be more innovative in teaching and learning.

In summary, it could be concluded that within a limited extent of autonomy in curriculum development, Green School chose to adjust learning objectives and restructure scattered learning content. This minor improvement might be a wise strategy when the school has no previous experience in developing a brand-new school-based curriculum. Interview data proved that this initial change in curriculum overcame certain limitations of the national curriculum and made positive improvements in teaching and learning practices, for instance when learning objectives are more appropriate and feasible, the curriculum is more coherent and appropriate to students’ needs, and teacher autonomy has been increased. Teachers feel that their teaching work is more comfortable and flexible. They are set free from time-constraints and can apply various teaching and

learning methods. Due to the pressure of high-stakes exams, the school is not able to make enormous changes to ‘key’ subjects such as math or literature but other ‘minor’ subjects such as civil education, history, or geography can be adjusted to local needs.

Advanced program.

Since the national curriculum cannot be primarily adjusted, Green School found another way to utilize its autonomy in the academic area. Instead of teaching and learning in one period (in the morning or afternoon), the school organized all classes into two periods per day:

Our school curriculum has Period 1 and 2. Period 1 is the basic program following MoET’s curriculum, and there might be added some projects or revisions. In Period 2, we apply our own curriculum and topics (I. 13: 76-80).

In this case, a basic program or ‘Period 1’ aims to deliver the key learning content of the national curriculum with aims at equipping students with MoET’s required learning outcomes. The advanced program or ‘Period 2’ is offered only in some key subjects and designed by schoolteachers. One interviewee added another rationale for the advanced program:

Previously the school offered only two ‘high quality’ classes with ‘two periods per day’ service. There were two special classes for gifted students and six general classes for other students. First, parents gave bribes to send their children to high-quality classes. Second, the school could not manage students’ off-time well because they had to attend private extra classes. Now all classes in my school now are ‘high quality’ with two periods per day. Students in grade 6 and 7 are able to have lunch at the school. ... We can manage students better. When I changed education services, our school budget was raised. Although I did not increase the tuition fee, we have greater financial resources to improve teachers’ salaries. They

are paid well. They feel happy and do not have to teach the extra classes. I must think about financial matters (I. 29: 65-78).

This response might hint that the advanced program is derived from the needs of students and parents. It is not a rare practice in the context of test-oriented education when the ultimate learning goal is to get excellent academic performance in learning and high scores in high-stakes exams, for instance ‘parents gave bribes to send their children to high-quality classes’, students ‘had to attend to low-quality extra classes.’ The school just recognized this essential need and exercised the granted autonomy to respond to it. Another reason might be that due to limited autonomy, Green School is not able to significantly change the national curriculum. Moreover, merely adding a large amount of the school’s tailored learning content into the basic program national curriculum seems to be unfeasible since the curriculum might become overload. Thus, the school separated one basic program to offer learning content of the national curriculum and one advanced program to introduce extended learning content. The school also provided supplementary services like lunch meals. It could be interpreted that when developing the school-based curriculum, self-financed schools like Green School must take both educational needs and financial issues into account. On the positive side, this strategy might help students get prestigious tutors in their school instead of going to private tutoring classes. Parents could feel assured when their children stay at school the whole day and are well managed by teachers¹². The introduction of the advanced programs and supplementary services help the school increase its budget and manage students better. However, it is uncertainty whether the strategy of transforming all classes into ‘high quality’ classes could lead to

¹² Teachers in Vietnam are especially respected and valued as essential as second mothers or fathers (see Chapter 3, section Teachers in Public Secondary Schools)

actual improvements in quality or whether it is just changing of the label and increasing learning time from one to two periods per day.

Next, interviewees reported that in both basic and advanced programs, the amount of learning time at Green School is increased compared to those of other schools. One interviewee gave an example in literature:

There are generally four sessions in the advanced program of other secondary schools, while ours is five sessions. Other schools offer three sessions for the basic program, and we offer four (I. 2: 109-111).

However, this increase has not occurred in all subjects or for all classes, as one physics teacher explained:

In other upper secondary schools, they teach according to the MoET's national curriculum. We also apply that curriculum and increase practice sessions. For physics, the MoET allocated two sessions per week, if it is Class D¹³, we maintain two sessions per week. But for Class A¹⁴, there are six sessions per week (I. 3: 43-47).

It should be clarified that the advanced program is composed of the key subjects of high-stakes exams, and increasing instructional hours occurred in those key subjects only. For upper secondary education, for example, students of Class A take an advanced program in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Therefore, the instructional hours of mathematics, physics, and chemistry are remarkably increased, whereas those of literature, English, and other social science subjects are remained the same as in the national curriculum. This curriculum structure reflects a typical test-oriented education in Vietnam, and even schools with academic autonomy must accept it as an unavoidable

¹³ Class D is for students who take Block D (mathematics, literature, and English) in the national examination.

¹⁴ Class A is for students who take Block A (mathematics, physics, and chemistry) in the national examination.

tendency. On the one hand, high-stakes exams constitute a major influence on the structure and instructional hours of the school-based curriculum. On the other hand, the design of the school-based curriculum with a strong emphasis on key subjects might aggravate the value of teaching to the test and turn students' attention to these subjects only. Although there is no clear evidence reflecting the negative consequences of increasing school hours to students, this might be a matter of concern.

Interviewees listed different purposes for the strategy of extending instructional time. First, some teachers emphasized the purpose of sharpening theoretical knowledge:

In Period 2 [advanced program], we introduce the various types of exercises (I. 12: 66).

We just add two or three practice sessions. With the same learning content, it would be better if students could practice more (I. 22: 143-145).

These responses reflected a traditional approach to teaching and learning in Vietnam in which theoretical knowledge must be followed by practice exercises to help students better understand and memorize. Therefore, they spend most of the increased time introducing various types of exercises to sharpen theoretical knowledge as well as to prepare for high-stakes tests. In the same vein, other teachers took the advanced program as a chance to introduce advanced knowledge, for example:

Because our students are quite good and intelligent, we need to supplement with more advanced topics (I. 1: 33-34).

I must add many reference books because the official textbook is too easy for students in our school. They do not want to learn in textbooks... But I mainly prepare them for standardized tests like IELTS and TOEIC (I. 13: 67-71).

Because basic knowledge in the textbook and national curriculum are too easy for school students, teachers are likely to introduce advanced knowledge in their lessons to

meet the higher needs of students. Like in the case of Interviewee #13, she is teaching students who are taking Block D in the national examination and/or taking a standardized test such as IELTS or TOEIC. They have good English proficiency, and the national curriculum might be too easy for them. Thanks to the advanced program, the teacher was able to have more time to prepare for these important tests. Although these responses showed a strong influence of teaching to the test, the positive side might be that the advanced program is designed according to the need and capacity of students.

Besides this, developing student competencies was also recognized as another purpose for increasing instructional time:

There are optional lessons. When you look at our school curriculum and the MoET's national curriculum, you can see that the former allocated more learning sessions. It's time for teachers to be flexible. In other secondary schools, some lessons could be studied in one session only but two or even four sessions in Green School. I can take the objective of developing speaking skills as an example. The current curriculum of MoET focuses too much on developing writing skills while speaking skills are undervalued. Thus, our curriculum turns more attention to this limitation. We focus more on speaking skills, speech, and presentation skills. I think it is necessary for students to acquire this skill (I. 2: 113-122).

The school-based curriculum aims to develop students' communication competencies in a foreign language rather than master grammar only. We increased the time for listening, writing, speaking instead of doing grammar exercises (I. 18: 185-189).

Another teacher expressed a balancing view:

We must design teaching and learning activities for six sessions per week, including learning topics, experiential learning activities. We increased exercise sessions to obtain the final goal that after three years [of upper secondary education], students can apply in practice and get good results in exams (I. 3: 47-51).

These responses might hint that increasing instructional time aims to develop student competencies and skills, especially those that have been underestimated in the national curriculum. It is likely that the school recognized the gap between the national curriculum's limitations and students' needs. For Interviewee #18, she understood that her students need to develop speaking skills in different scenarios rather than writing good essays and communicate in a foreign language effectively rather than doing hard grammar exercises. This data also reflects an increase of teacher autonomy in curriculum development where they can add learning content that is more responsive and suitable for their school students.

In short, the introduction of basic and advanced programs with an increase of instructional time might be positive in terms of responding to students' needs of test preparation and overcoming current limitations of the national curriculum. Besides this, although test preparation is a primary goal of increasing instructional time, the school also tries to turn more attention to the goal of students' competency development.

Extra courses.

In addition to the official academic curriculum, Green School offered some extra courses such as test preparation or English intensive courses. For instance, when the official school curriculum ends, the school offers a test preparation course for students who are going to take the national university entrance exam. The school collaborated with a private English center to organize intensive English courses at the school for students.

First, observational data from school meetings showed that the school offered these courses to meet the needs of students and parents regarding extra learning.

For Grade 12 students, when the school curriculum ends on this 20th May, we could let students be free to find their own private tutors. But we organize this preparation course (O. 19: 95-97)

Many students spend a large amount of money for learning at private centers. I have experience in this field because my son had studied in these centers, but my daughter no longer studies there. Based on parents' recommendations and the proposal of I. [English center's name], we will provide infrastructure to organize English courses. ... You [homeroom teachers] can discuss this with students. If it is feasible, we can organize English courses. There are several benefits to our students. Firstly, students can stay in the classroom to learn intensive English and do not have to go to private centers. Secondly, in terms of infrastructure, as we do not take our infrastructure on a lease, but the center can use our infrastructure freely, the tuition fee could be reduced. Our primary purpose is to organize English courses for those who are really in need. Thirdly, students have the opportunity to study with highly-qualified teachers (O. 4: 189-208)

It is explained that private tutoring is an essential need of all students and parents in the context of a test-based education, especially for English or other subjects for high-stakes exams (see Chapter 3. Private Tutoring). Therefore, it is quite difficult to decide whether the introduction of these extra courses increases the learning burden on students because if they do not learn in school, they will learn in private tutoring centers. On the positive side, these quotations show that the school pays special attention to students' needs, and utilizes its available resources to meet the needs of students and parents. The offer of English courses, for example, is derived from parents' recommendations. Parents

reflected that when learning English at private centers, their students have to spend considerable time and money while teaching and learning quality is not assured, such as the use of an unaccredited curriculum or the employment of unqualified teachers. Therefore, the school initiated cooperation with a prestigious English center to offer high quality and affordable courses to students. In this cooperative venture, the school contributes infrastructure and management while the center provides accredited curriculum and teachers, who come from English native speaking countries. In other words, the school just recognized the needs of students and parents on extra learning and responded to them.

Second, for a self-financed school like Green School, providing extra courses might be a practical strategy to increase the school budget, but this is not a matter of utmost importance. In the above example of cooperating with a private English center, the school was willing to reduce its economic gains by allowing the center to use school infrastructure freely as a way to reduce tuition fees for students. Another similar case was found at a school meeting:

You [homeroom teachers] should convey to students that the school maximally supports this course. For example, several days ago, some homeroom teachers suggested that the tuition fee should be 70,000 VND per session. But after calculation, we decided to maintain it at 60,000 VND per session.

The school has to compensate from the school budget. For example, the total number of mathematics sessions is 10.5, but we collect tuition fees for ten sessions only. ... Similarly, for literature, the total number of sessions is 8.5, but we collect fees for eight sessions only (O. 19: 323-325).

This data prove that economic gain was not the most important goal when organizing extra courses because the school gained meager income or even suffered a loss

from this source. The school did not take extra courses as a golden opportunity to maximize the collection of money from students. With school autonomy in finance and benefiting from its reputation, the school can set higher tuition fees, but maintained an affordable tuition fee for extra courses. It could be explained that because these courses are optional to students, a high tuition fee might attract fewer students to take the courses. Another explanation might be that the school is concerned with affordability for students and does not want to put the financial pressure on students and parents.

Third, when organizing extra courses, the school paid particular attention to educational quality. For example:

Our investigation showed that the center is a prestigious English center with excellent performance and high responsibility. They are also assured in terms of teaching quality. Although many English centers proposed to teach English in our school, we have not accepted any other center.

The School Administration Board will actively work with homeroom teachers.

We should avoid the situation we had last year when students did not take our school's preparation course. Finally, students who had the lowest results are those who did not take our courses (O. 3: 167-170)

In the first quotation, it can be seen that the school carefully selected its partner to provide excellent teaching and learning quality for students. This careful selection was necessary to maintain the school's reputation and ensure long-term benefits such as student recruitment. In the second quotation, although taking a preparation course is voluntary for students, the school tries to attract more students to take the course because 'students who had the lowest results are those who did not take our courses.' One explanation for this response is that the school expected high student performance in high-stakes exams as well as an increase in the school's reputation. Another possibility is

that the school was under the pressure from the performance regime and did its best to improve student test results. However, one potential consequence might be that students cannot voluntarily choose the school's extra courses when their decision might be primarily affected by teachers' persuasion or their peers' choices.

To respond to the needs of students and parents, the school assigned teachers to extra courses according to parents' proposal:

After finishing the official school-based curriculum, there will be modifications in terms of teaching personnel according to parents' proposals rather than homeroom teachers or School Administration Board. ... We should send this message to our parents. This modification is derived from our expectations of how to obtain the highest quality, how to teach students most effectively, and how to get the highest result (O. 19: 254-261).

In this case, as parents paid for extra courses, the school granted them a significant right to choose the best teachers for their children. This data indicates that the school did not consider these extra courses as 'extra' or 'minor' but it was concerned with education quality because these courses might significantly affect student results in the high-stakes tests. Therefore, the ultimate goal of organizing extra courses was 'how to obtain the highest quality, how to teach students most effectively, and how to get the highest result.'

Competency-based approach.

Changes to learning objectives. Although the competency-based approach was newly piloted in Green School since the introduction of a school-based curriculum, interview data showed that teachers' perception had undergone considerable changes in terms of setting learning objectives. In one training session, teachers discussed the goal of teaching and learning:

Teacher 1: ... I wish they [students] could be more excited with the subject [physics] when they are excited, they would learn more. It means we must teach them the root of knowledge.

Teacher 2: They must understand the nature of knowledge...

Teacher 1: If we apply the competency-based approach, we can give students space to explore and do exciting things. I would like to take this opportunity to attract them to love science and physics (O. 12: 264-272).

In this case, besides the goal of teaching theoretical knowledge and preparing for the test, teachers turned more attention to the goal of nurturing students' emotions in learning and inspiring the love of knowledge such as students 'are excited with the subjects' and 'love sciences.' This view is vastly different from teaching and learning practice in traditional public schools where students are expected to memorize and replicate knowledge from teachers and textbooks as much as possible and then reflect them in exercises and tests. Besides, teachers not only supposed to fill up their students with knowledge, they also aim to 'teach them the root of knowledge' to make them 'understand the nature of knowledge.' This data also reflects a change in teacher perception that is more concerned with students' learning rather than teachers' teaching in the old way.

Next, in one teacher meeting on preparing for an inter-subject learning activity, teachers discussed planning learning objectives:

The typical feature of this experiential learning activity is after one lesson, what students can learn from each subject like biology, geography, and civil education. The next goal is what students can learn from life. They cannot solve a practical problem with one subject but only with several. ... The highest goal of inter-subject learning is finding what problems can be solved (O. 26: 137-142)

The most crucial objective of this experiential learning activity ... is to establish students' competency in doing research, active involvement in learning, and cooperative skills in team working. ... This learning activity is not a trip with friends to see trees or catch insects ... I expect higher objectives of research competencies rather than knowledge objective only (O. 26: 101-110 ... 118-120)

We set the topic 'Preserving biological diversity' as a practical issue to be solved. ... Then we set objectives and learning outcomes of the topic: 'what students can do after this experience' (O. 26: 175-180).

It could be seen that for this inter-subject learning activity, teachers set objectives like 'what students can learn from life,' 'what students are able to do after this experience,' 'what problem can be solved,' 'get more practical experience.' It seems that academic knowledge is no longer the only learning objective, but students' competencies to deal with problems in practice are also important. Moreover, teachers turned more attention to other skills such as 'doing research,' 'cooperative skills in team working' or attitudes in learning such as 'active involvement.' This data demonstrated a significant change in teachers' perception from teaching school-based curriculum toward developing students' competencies.

Changes to classroom practices. Besides changes in teachers' perception, research data revealed many positive changes in classroom practices. The first observable change was that teachers enjoyed increased autonomy in selecting instructional content and material, for example:

Interviewer: Why did you select learning content that is not in the textbook?

Interviewee: Because it is outdated and too familiar to students. Students have studied this content before. If I continue using this content, I cannot evaluate whether students formed comprehensive reading skills. Therefore, I used a brand

new text that has never been introduced in the textbook before. The text is fascinating and controversial. It can be a source of discussion and controversy (I. 2: 46-52)

In this case, the literature teacher replaced some learning content in the textbook with another text to attract students' attention and better evaluate students' competencies. It could be seen that teachers in Green School enjoyed higher autonomy in classroom practice than their peers in other public schools who must fully comply with the textbook and have limited autonomy to introduce new instructional content or materials outside the textbook.

Second, school-based curriculum and the competency-based approach encouraged teachers to change their teaching and learning mindset:

Beforehand I wished to transmit as much knowledge as possible to students, and I speak a lot. Then [after applying school-based curriculum] I just focus on core knowledge and pay more attention to the objective of students' competency development' (I. 24: 208-212).

Previously, teachers were the sole source of knowledge that students could acquire. Nowadays, that status has been changed. We cannot transmit knowledge to students, but both teachers and students must cooperate to explore knowledge and solve problems. Although this tendency has just begun in Vietnam, I believe this would become a fact (I. 18: 180-188).

We have to change the teaching and learning methods. Teaching and learning do not only occur in the classroom; teaching methods are not only teachers reading aloud, and students taking notes. Student-teacher relationship is 'one-zero'. We must change to one-to-one to ensure students' development (O. 5: 140-143).

These responses might indicate a turn from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches in classroom practice. ‘Student-teacher relationship is one-zero’ means that traditionally, teachers play a central role in the teaching and learning process and are an authoritative source of knowledge in school education whereas students play a passive role in receiving knowledge (see Chapter 3. Teaching and Learning in Public Secondary Schools). Good teachers are those who are ‘exclusive sources of knowledge’ and ‘transmit as much knowledge as possible.’ In the case of Green School, instead of playing a primary role in the teaching and learning process, teachers turned to a supportive and facilitative role in which ‘teachers and students must cooperate to explore knowledge and solve problems.’ Teachers called the new teaching practice a ‘one-one relationship’ in which learners are also as important as teachers, and both are key actors in the teaching and learning process.

Third, since the introduction of a school-based curriculum, teachers have reduced lecture time and given students more opportunities to develop their competencies:

We must look at the final goal. It does not mean how teachers teach students, but after each lesson, which competencies students can gain (I. 18: 137-139).

I designed a learning project on investigating the effect of chemical fertilizer on flora, fauna, and human life. There was a student group responsible for making a propaganda campaign about the topic. They made a short cartoon. Some students edited the transcript, some drew pictures, some made a caption, and some edited music, and sound. That was so amazing. I believe that if their parents could see these products, they would be pleased and proud of their children (O. 2: 263-270).

I am guiding students to implement a project in advertising. The content in the textbook is outdated because it mentions only paper-based advertisements. It is not updated. I allowed five student groups to fully demonstrate their creativity,

and they could make clips or posters as long as they met three criteria: appropriateness, aesthetics, and uniqueness. They are working and will present their products next 16 April. If you visit our class, you might see how creative they are (I. 2: 96-101).

The first quotation showed that the teacher no longer emphasized ‘how teachers teach students’ but the goal of developing students’ competencies ‘after one lesson, which competencies students could gain.’ In the remaining quotations, to realize the goal of developing student competencies, teachers employed project-based learning to stimulate students to investigate the practice and develop their competencies. This practice might illustrate an increased autonomy of teachers in the classroom on the one hand, and their changing role in teaching and learning activities on the other hand. During these interviews, teachers expressed the happiness and excitement that came from making changes to teaching and learning and observing the improvements of students. For students, instead of absorbing knowledge from teachers and textbooks passively, they can be challenged with a new learning experience like making a propaganda campaign or designing advertisements. Teachers recognized that after three years, the school has gradually developed students’ research competency from experiential learning activities (O. 26: 89-90). They shared their observations on these positive changes of students:

I realize that when students have the opportunity to make a presentation or solve problems together, they can attain many skills and competencies. Thanks to new teaching and learning methods, our students become more active and independent (I. 20: 135-138).

I see the advantage of these methods [project-based learning and other new teaching and learning methods] is promoting students’ self-study skills and inherent creativity (O. 2: 223-224).

The quotation below illustrated changes in students' learning and their improvements when the school applied the competency-based approach:

After these learning activities, students learn not only knowledge but also many skills. For example, we introduced the topic 'Preserving and developing green sticky rice' which integrates technology, biology, history, and geography.

Students must do many tasks. When they visited a village, local people did not allow students to take photos. Then, students had to ask the school for a recommendation letter. This is a regular administrative procedure that they had never known about before, and their parents did not teach them. They had never visited somewhere before and not been welcomed by local people. They understood that they must have a recommendation letter; they must have communication skills. ... They developed many skills. Finally, they had to persuade local people to use healthy ingredients to make green sticky rice. They wanted to hang up a poster in a Culture Center. But they needed to get approval from the authorities. They learned all these things in an inter-subject learning topic. It means that teaching and learning are not limited within classroom walls but expanded to the outside world (O. 5: 152-168).

It can be inferred from this data that project-based learning in particular and innovative teaching and learning methods in general, made initial positive improvements in students' learning. When 'teaching and learning is not limited within classroom walls but expanded to the outside world', students are challenged with problems and situations that they have never faced before like arranging a trip to a traditional village, meeting local people and local authorities, investigating the historical and geographical features of a village, persuading local people, and making communication campaigns. These knowledge and skills cannot be learned from any school or textbook; they must be

experienced and developed them by themselves. Students become more active when having more chances to apply theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems, discover their untapped potentials, and learn new things.

In summary, in comparison to minor changes in the structure or learning content of the school-based curriculum, school autonomy had a more considerable influence on classroom practices. Since governing bodies only control learning outcomes and the general structure of the school curriculum, the school and teachers could enjoy extensive freedom in implementing the curriculum as long as learning outcomes stated in the national curriculum were obtained. Students are the greatest beneficiaries of these improvements from becoming the center of the teaching and learning process, experiencing many different instructional methods, and having many chances to develop useful skills and competencies.

Changes to student assessment. Next, research data showed initial changes in terms of student assessment, which was turning to the competency-based approach. Besides maintaining traditional forms of knowledge-based assessment in most essential exams such as the semester exam, Green School encouraged teachers to pilot competency-based assessment in less important tests like formative tests. For example, one technology teacher introduced her method of assessment in a teacher meeting:

Today we learned how to make fruit syrup, and when I assessed my students' products, I realized that their syrup was even more delicious than mine (O. 2: 291-294).

Traditionally, paper-based tests are most prevalent in formative and summative tests in all public schools. In this new case, students can finish a project to meet learning requirements instead of doing a paper test. This assessment method was relevant to the competency-based approach that is concerned with what students can do after learning

new knowledge. Observation data showed that the school presented a determined resolve to turn to competency-based assessment by organizing a series of workshops and training for teachers (O. 6; O. 12; O. 18). School managers also encourage teachers to revamp and improve student assessment practices:

Whenever you [teachers] propose a new form of assessment that can assess students' knowledge, skills, and competencies, we [the Administration Board] will approve, as long as you make a feasible and reasonable proposal (O. 2: 276-280). We are now applying the school-based curriculum. You [teachers] can change your assessments [to competency-based assessment] in the formative tests. We can make these changes, and the School Administration Board will be accountable to the DoET, BoET (O. 6: 27-31).

It could be seen that the Administration Board showed strong support to innovations in the formative tests because the school has extensive autonomy in this field: 'we can make these changes.' With granted teacher autonomy, teachers can submit their proposal on how to change formative tests in their subject towards assessing students' competencies rather than merely checking their memories or test-taking skills. Although the school was always willing to support teachers' innovative ideas, it required teachers to 'make a feasible and reasonable proposal' as a form of accountability to governing bodies, who might not understand and support changes in assessment methods. This response further illustrated the gap between school innovations and barriers from governing bodies. However, it should be noted that competency-based assessment in Green School was really in its infancy because there were few teachers who could successfully apply the new assessment methods in practice. This limitation might be attributed to the fact that the school and teachers had no previous expertise or experience of competency-based assessment. In comparison to changes in classroom practice, both

the school and teachers seemed to be more careful in student assessment because it is considered the most crucial factor in the teaching and learning process. In a test-oriented education, any change which might affect student performance must be taken into serious consideration. This practice will be further discussed in the section of Teaching to the Test.

In short, the school-based curriculum and competency-based approach have created a critical momentum to foster initial innovations in teaching and learning practice, especially at the classroom level. Teachers changed their perception of teaching and learning and turned more attention to developing students' competencies. They also made significant efforts to realize these goals in their teaching activities. As a result, there were positive improvements like turning to a student-based approach, applying project-based learning or inter-subject learning, and applying competency-based assessment in some subjects. Students were beneficiaries from these changes where they could gain more diverse learning experiences and acquire new learning skills and competencies. However, these changes were not prevalent in all subjects, and the competency-based approach was really in its early stage. Teacher autonomy was increased where they had more flexibility in choosing teaching and learning methods and forms of student assessment as long as they could hold accountable to the School Administration Board, and governing bodies.

School Strategies to School-Based Curriculum

Creating school identity by the school-based curriculum.

Art Education and Physical Education. With a limited autonomy in school-based curriculum development, Green School devoted considerable effort to make its curriculum distinctive from other public schools. Research data revealed that the most considerable changes could be found in subjects such as art education and physical education, as teachers explained:

Our school is distinguished from others by art education and physical education.

The curriculum in other [public] schools mainly concentrates on academic objectives. In our school, since the school year 2013-2014, students have been involved in art and physical education programs that are distinguished from MoET's curriculum. It means besides the MoET program, our students must join club classes. ... We organize these programs like credits in universities, and there are no longer fixed classes. Students can be free to register for their favorite club, and they can change their selection once per year (O. 5: 242-246).

The most typical feature of Green School is integrating club activities such as music, fine art, physical exercise, and sports into the official curriculum ... For example, I can make a comparison between the Green School and my old school. In the old school, the MoET arranged one physical education period, one music, one fine art per week. That's all, and you [teachers] have to teach precisely in line with the curriculum. In Green School, besides this curriculum, we offered clubs in the afternoon, students can develop their competencies and talent. They are fully developed ... I think I like this innovative idea. If I were a parent, I would really like it. When integrating clubs into the official curriculum, students are beneficiaries and develop their potential (I. 15: 84-96)

It could be explained that for art education and physical education, the current national curriculum provides only one nationwide curriculum and all students with different needs and interests have no other choice. Because these subjects are not included in high-stakes exams, the school can enjoy high autonomy in developing its school-based curriculum. It transformed all traditional classes of art education and physical education into club activities. It means that students can be free to select and participate in their favorite art and sports clubs every semester instead of all students learning the art and

physical education in fixed a class from the same lesson. The school offered a wide variety of clubs for students, for example, music, guitar, organ, sculpture and painting, dance sport, football, baseball, badminton, table tennis, yoga, and taekwondo (O. 5: 247-248). The curriculum of these clubs was entirely developed by Green School. The school explained the rationale of these curricula:

At present, most schools are putting a strong emphasis on teaching knowledge - how to teach students to get awards in the national excellent student contest, to enter into universities. Most students know how many multiple-choice questions there are in a test, but they cannot play baseball. They do not know the layout of a painting, and they cannot even distinguish the tone of colors, especially in our generation. Therefore, our school compensates for these weaknesses. We have been investing much time and resources into these areas (O.5: 71-79).

Some students are not fond of any sport. But at least when they learn soccer, they might know soccer rules, and then, when watching television, they can talk with their father. Or when they learn baseball, at least they might know baseball rule. If they study abroad, they can chat with foreign friends. Some just want to learn some soccer at Grade 10, learn some baseball at Grade 11, and learn some badminton at Grade 12 because they are not into sports, but they at least know the rules. We do not expect all of them will become artists, but they at least must know the structure of a picture, hot and cold colors, which my generation never learned before. Those are practical problems that students might face in the future, not only knowledge. I am a doctor of physics, but conversations might not begin with physics but sports or a picture. ... We expect that our students will attain the goal. ... If you can visit our school this afternoon, you can watch our soccer competition. We hold them every year (O. 5: 250-266).

It could be interpreted that although enjoying significant autonomy in this field, Green School recognized its main barriers when introducing its school-based art and physical curriculum. First, teaching and learning have only focused on imparting knowledge and responding to the tests. Teaching and learning in secondary school put the highest priority on ‘how to teach students to get awards in national excellent student contests, to get entrance into universities’ whereas other educational objectives such as physical education or art education are underrated. The sentence ‘most students know how many multiple-choice questions there are in a test, but they cannot play baseball’ highlighted a paradox between the objective of ‘teaching to the test’ and developing students’ characters. Traditionally, while math, literature, English, and natural sciences are prioritized as ‘key subjects’ with a large amount of learning time, art and physical education are only classified as ‘minor subjects’ with one learning session per week. Therefore, making teachers, students, and parents turn their attention from academic objectives to art and physical ones is such a tough challenge to the school. Second, the school deeply understood that there are students ‘who are not fond of any sport.’ There are possibilities that these students are personally not interested in sports, or they have experienced uninteresting art and physical education since public primary school, or they have always been under pressure to learn to the test from their childhoods. Besides, interview data added that as being located in an urban area, the school site is not able to offer enough space for sports activities (I. 26: 320-325). One teacher admitted, ‘We are not able to offer all clubs, sometimes students like a certain kind of art or sport, but we are not able to respond’ (I. 15: 92-94). In spite of encountering these difficulties, Green School had a strong determination to realize a school-based curriculum in art and physical education. It really expected to provide ‘things that my generation never learned before’ and prepare students to become good citizens in the future.

Being in its initial phase, the school did not set ambitious goals like attracting all students or educating them to become talented. 'We do not expect all of them [students] will become artists, but at least they can know the structure of a picture, hot and cold colors,' or 'know soccer rules.' The opponents could argue that these education objectives might be inappropriate and formalistic because when learning music, students must be able to play musical instruments or when learning soccer, they must be able to play soccer. If teaching art and sport aims to equip students merely with music and sports knowledge, it would further burden students' learning without purpose. However, in this context, the vice-principal wanted to convey an implication that even when attaining minimum objectives of the school-based curriculum of 'to know', students could find it useful in life situations, for example 'when they watch television, they are able to talk with their father', or 'at least they might know baseball rules. If they study abroad, they could chat with foreign friends'. Green Schools had many attractive music and sports activities (O. 5: 265-269). Field notes also recorded that students often spent break time practicing dance, playing music instruments, or playing sports in the schoolyard. They were very active and confident when demonstrating their strengths in art performance or sports competitions. These observations could illustrate the initial achievements of physical and art education in Green School.

One noticeable feature emerging from this data is when developing a school-based curriculum, the school paid particular attention to students' needs. Transforming from traditional classes to club activities, allowing students to select their favorite club and change the club if they did not like it were rare practices in public secondary schools generally. This means that the school was concerned with students' expectations and experiences. Moreover, it could be seen that instead of offering students what the school is available, the school turned to explore what students needed and tried to satisfy them.

For example, guitar, dance sports, tennis, yoga, and taekwondo have never been included in the traditional curriculum, but students at Green School are really interested in it. Although the school has no teachers in these subjects, it invited visiting teachers to respond to students' expectations (O. 5: 270-276). This example proved a distinctive and innovative perspective that puts students at the center of school education and especially takes their needs and autonomy into consideration.

It could be concluded that with granted school autonomy in the education area, Green School tried its best to meet students' needs and provide diverse and exciting learning experiences. On a positive note, this program contributed to making the distinctive features of the school-based curriculum and could attract prospective students and parents who support holistic education. However, this practice could be a negative indicator to those who are concerned with teaching to the test because they might think that learning art, music, or physical exercise could reduce the time available for 'key subjects.' Another problem is that these clubs required a large amount of school budget, and students must contribute an extra fee to participate in a club. Therefore, this practice might impose a financial burden on students and parents where they must contribute both tuition fees for the basic program and extra fees for extra courses.

Co-curricular activities¹⁵. As co-curricular programs are not tightly regulated in the national curriculum, Green School enjoyed extensive autonomy in this area. The school emphasized co-curricular activities as a distinguishing feature of school identity. One teacher gave the following description:

In other public schools, they must implement the MoET's co-curricular curriculum, and they must strictly comply with it and nearly be passive in terms of

¹⁵ Co-curricular refers to activities, programs, and learning experiences that are closely connected to the academic curriculum to consolidate and complement what students have learned in school (Dolph, 2010).

curriculum. Then if there are programs designed by the DoET or the BoET, they must stick to them. Indeed, they have no space for creativity. In Green School ... we developed our programs, for example, life value education, skill education, we went to Soc Son [a nature conservation area], or held experiential learning activities in historical places, inter-subject learning. There are various and diverse activities. (I. 15: 154-166)

This response might hint that if all public schools nationwide apply one national program designed by the MoET, it might be unsuitable to schools' features in different areas. Moreover, when schools must always implement plans and activities of governing bodies, they might become passive and 'have no space for creativity.' Because the co-curricular activities are not strictly regulated by governing bodies and less pressured by high-stake exams, Green School exercised its autonomy to design a school-based co-curricular program with many activities like life value education, skills education, experiential learning, and inter-subject learning. Besides co-curricular activities at the school level, Green School introduces many student clubs like sports, dance, art, science, media and communication, history, event management, and environmental protection. Students could be free to choose their favorite clubs to develop potential skills and capacities.

One noticeable feature of the co-curricular program in Green School was a strong response to students' needs. In the case of students' research, for instance, it was not initially an area of priority in school strategy. However, when organizing science research activities, students had enthusiastically participated and gained many fruitful achievements (O. 1: 30-37; O. 4: 92-103, 126-128). For example:

This year is the first time that we participated in a national science contest. We have five teams, and all of them had awards. One team did not get an award from

the MoET, but they got an award for creativity. He [the team member] was very sad, and I told him, ‘you tried your best, and you are excellent. There is no reason for being sad today’. He said, ‘When I go home, I will continue doing research, I will take the contest next year.’ That’s great (O. 4: 531-536).

All achievements are not derived from us [Administration Board] but our students. We cannot make bricks without straw. Therefore, we hope that you will especially pay attention to this activity (O. 4: 247-250).

The data showed that students are particularly interested in doing research, which they have less chance to do if study in regular public schools. When recognizing this need, the school made remarkable efforts to develop scientific research like investing in the science club, encouraging teachers to support students, and rewarding teachers whose students gain achievements in contests. It could be seen that Green School has developed student research programs in response to students’ needs and expectations of experiencing an engaging and diverse learning environment.

There might be several justifications underlying the recent development of co-curricular activities in Green School. First, co-curricular has a strong link to the school philosophy of holistic education, for example:

The objective of Green School is educating students to become good citizens in the future in physical health, intelligence, and mental health. In general, we expect them to become holistic global citizens. ... We do not educate students who are good at only one subject (O. 5: 51-58).

It could be interpreted that because the school followed a philosophy of holistic education, it provided students with not only academic knowledge but also co-curricular activities to develop ‘in all physical health, intelligence, and mental health.’ Moreover, Green School applied a competency-based approach that aims to develop students’

competencies in various areas. To develop competencies, students could not only learn theoretical knowledge but also experience diverse activities to link knowledge to practice. Therefore, co-curricular activities were a critical part of the school-based curriculum besides academic learning. For example, for those who like physics, they can be involved in many co-curricular activities of science clubs:

We are going to establish an electronics club. ... We are experimenting with a sumo robot ... or we will make a soccer robot. Every student could make a soccer robot, and then we can join in a game (I. 5: 292-297).

It could be understood that when being involved in these activities, students would have a chance to consolidate physics knowledge and apply it to make specific products like robots. When exploring knowledge that is not introduced in the textbook, students can increasingly sharpen their learning skills such as self-study or teamwork. Interview data further supported this idea:

One advantage of Green School is that students can be fully involved in co-curricular activities. They are the subject of activities. They are active in all activities while teachers orient them (I. 15: 158-161) I think students could gain a lot. The more activities they are involved in, the more benefits they can gain. I think Green School has a strength besides the academic curriculum. Two programs help students develop comprehensively. One difference is that when students have chances to organize activities, they can work very well. They planned themes, identified objectives, developed programs, prepared for all activities, realized activities, and finally, they delivered outputs. I think we are on the right track to develop students' competencies (I. 15: 165-173).

This response showed that students played a central role and became 'the subjects' of co-curricular activities. Thanks to being wholly involved in all stages of one activity

from planning to implementation, they can master many useful skills to deal with practical situations and increase their autonomy. In short, Green School developed co-curricular activities as a valuable supplement to the academic curriculum to realize the goal of developing students' competencies and holistic education.

Second, an investment in co-curricular activities might be attributed to a strategy of developing school identity. The school principal explained:

I am not going to compete with anyone. I just think that when being a principal, I should create a unique identity different from a gifted school. I am not able to compete with them. Why? Their students [students in gifted schools] are covered by government scholarships, my students [students in Green School] must pay tuition fees. Their students are excellent students from the beginning. We are not able to compete with them. Our best students will apply to gifted schools when they finish lower secondary education because they will not have to contribute tuition fees. They even get scholarships... I know that we are weaker than them; we are 'the poor kid'; thus, we must create our own identity – that is the curriculum. We are different from them. They are gifted schools that train 'fighting cocks.' We are not. All students must learn all and experience more. Everyone's final goal is to get into university. Their students can get national prizes and get into university, and our students can also get into university. However, our students are more active. That is the difference (I. 25: 275-287).

In this response, the principal compared Green School with another gifted school. She took this example because the gifted school is nearby, and these two school models are always under scrutiny. She admitted that the gifted school has many advantages, and Green School is not able to compete with it. For instance, Green School is less competitive than other public schools when students must contribute a high tuition fee,

and consequently, it could not attract excellent students, especially those from low or middle income family. However, the principal emphasized that the philosophy of holistic education and an emphasis on co-curricular activities have made Green School distinguished from others. In the gifted school as well as in other public schools, students have to learn a lot to prepare for high-stakes exams. Their only task is learning, and they gradually become ‘fighting cocks.’ In Green School, although students must also learn to the tests, they have many chances to experience co-curricular activities to relax and develop other potential competencies. In other words, balancing the goal of test preparation and student competency development has become one distinctive feature of the identity of Green School.

Another observation showed that Green School was willing to provide financial support for implementing a school-based curriculum, for instance:

Experiential learning activities are not included in the tuition fee. We organize many activities without students’ financial contributions. For this activity, for instance, we call for a lower amount of money than the estimated budget. Thus, homeroom teachers, please share this information with parents to make them understand that our school firmly commits to the competency-based approach (O. 25: 113-117).

It could be inferred from these quotations that the school showed a strong determination to reach the goal of the competency-based approach. In this case, it could be clarified that the students’ tuition fees only covered teaching and learning activities of the official curriculum, whereas most co-curricular or experiential learning activities, which were an important part of developing students’ competency, attracted additional fees. This means that though pursuing the goal of the competency-based approach, the school tried not to place students and parents under increased financial pressure, for

example, by organizing some activities without students' financial contributions, keeping tuition fees stable during a specific period or calling for the lowest supplemental contributions as possible. A possible explanation for this might be that the school has to protect its reputation. The school cannot take advantage of achieving a school goal to request additional contributions because it is committed itself not to increase tuition fees unreasonably. Besides, as the competency-based approach has been a new practice, it might be quite severe for the school to call for financial contributions when parents do not understand and support it.

In short, with limited autonomy in curriculum development, Green School significantly expected to create distinct features by offering an engaging co-curricular curriculum to students. This curriculum was considered a competitive advantage over other regular public schools that are financially subsidized under the state budget. This strategy might help the school attract more students, maintain its budget, and realize the school strategy of developing students' competencies.

A gradual change strategy.

Setting achievable objectives. Enjoying school autonomy has been accompanied by many changes in education and school practice. The principal shared her experience when the school was in the initial phase of the school-based curriculum.

They [teachers] reacted as a matter, of course. No one likes to change. They could use the old teaching plan to teach as usual. Their salary had not changed. Thus, if I required teachers to develop a new teaching plan, they might call my father's name (I. 26: 65-67).

It seems that enjoying school autonomy in curriculum development was not a matter of course but a big challenge for teachers in Green School. This situation might link to a long-established philosophy of stability in a traditional agricultural culture like

Vietnam. In this case, the principal had a clear understanding of the teachers' difficulties and resistance. She considered change resistance as a naturally unavoidable reaction of the transformation process. She understood that teachers have plausible reasons for maintaining the old curriculum; for instance, a school-based curriculum required them to exert much effort, whereas 'their salary had not changed.' Therefore, if the principal employed an authoritative approach in making changes, teachers might have developed an extremely aggressive attitude like 'they might call my father's name.' To deal with this situation, the principal shared her strategy

I rarely failed because I always estimated how far we could go. In other words, the basis of devising a strategic plan is our available resources. My teachers had no clear idea about competency-based assessment. Thus, I have not required that all tests have to apply a competency-based assessment approach, but we gradually moved forward. It means we have a schedule. Our objectives are set from narrow to general. There are many levels of objectives, and we gradually accomplish them. I do not set unrealistic goals; thus, we have fewer failures (I. 26: 9-15).

The data might hint that setting achievable objectives is a factor to ensure the success of a transformation process. The principal knew very well the school's available resources, including the capacity and readiness of the teaching staff. She devised a set of objectives ranging from specific to general and a feasible schedule. She did not urge teachers to attain expected goals quickly but to gradually approach them. This strategy is further illustrated in much of the interview and observations. For instance, Green School was at the initial stage of experimenting with competency-based assessment, and the principal called for changes:

Eventually, we must change. However, it should be changed gradually to avoid accidents. For example, if we are at 60km/h and suddenly turn to 0 km/h, there is

undoubtedly an accident. We need to make changes and modifications gradually. I think after a certain period, we could meet requirements (O. 6: 24-27) ... The school is willing to support you [teachers] to change gradually for safety reasons. (O. 6: 48-49).

Today we are talking about one great thing and that is competency-based assessment. However, to tell the truth, we have struggled with knowledge or skill evaluation, especially knowledge application. Thus, competency-based assessment is just a dream in the future that we are gradually realizing. ...

Presently I observe that your teaching plans strongly links with textbook structure, you list all eight competencies as your goal, but your teaching and learning activities do not aim to form any competency. ... I hope that we will go step by step. There will be not only these two training sessions but more, and teachers will gradually apply them (O. 18: 40-55).

It could be seen from this observation data that firstly the principal did not expect a sudden change in teaching and learning but a gradual improvement. She emphasized a slow and deliberate approach like ‘it should be changed gradually,’ ‘we need changes and modifications gradually,’ ‘after a certain period,’ ‘we will go step by step,’ and ‘teachers will gradually apply them.’ One visible gain of this approach is that teachers would have more time to familiarize themselves with new practices, and they could make fewer mistakes or errors during the transformation process. Secondly, the principal clearly understood limitations and difficulties that teachers have to face such as ‘we have struggled with knowledge and skill evaluation,’ teaching plans strongly links with textbook structure,’ or ‘teaching and learning activities do not aim to form any competencies.’ When pointing out these limitations, it does not mean the principal criticized teachers for making mistakes but empathized with the teachers’ struggle.

Besides, the principal emphasized that ‘the school is willing to support you [teachers].’ These statements conveyed a clear message that encouraged teachers to attempt new initiatives forcefully.

Next, the principal showed teachers the destination and how to get there:

We have organized two training sessions on competency-based assessment. I think today each teacher should design sample tests, or questions, a teaching plan that aims to develop student competencies. You should clarify which competencies you emphasize. Competencies cannot be formed after just one learning session, but your final goal must be competency development. ... I really expect that after this training session, we should ‘do something’ rather than only ‘listen to something.’ I hope that after two training sessions on theoretical concepts, the next ones will be experience and product sharing. Teachers must act. There must be specific outcomes ... When every teacher wrestles with your teaching plan, you can apply theoretical knowledge today into practice (O. 18: 11-32).

According to this data, although the principal maintained a gradual change strategy, she set many specific objectives and expected results for every phase. She suggested a specific pathway like ‘after two training sessions on theoretical concepts, the next ones would be experience and product sharing.’ In this situation, because teachers have specific knowledge on competency-based assessment, she required a higher result ‘we should ‘do something’ rather than only ‘listen to something,’ and specific outcomes like ‘every teacher should design sample tests, or questions, teaching plan that aims to develop student competencies.’ During this transformation process, on the one hand, the principal encouraged teachers by using words like ‘we should,’ ‘I really expect that,’ and ‘I hope that.’ On the other hand, she presented strong statements like ‘We must change’

or ‘Teachers must act. There must be specific outcomes’ as a confirmation that she committed with the goal of competency-based assessment.

Encouraging innovations. One value of Green School that emerged from research data was a strong support for all new ideas of teachers. One interviewee reported:

The principal is very open-minded. When one has new ideas, comments, or initiatives, he or she just feels free to talk to the principal (I. 12: 217-220).

In this school, whenever you [teachers] have a new idea such as new teaching and learning methods, or experiential learning activities, you have full autonomy to apply it in practice. The school fully supports improvement ideas. Teachers are not afraid of being restricted or disordering school-based curriculum (I. 7: 97-102).

They [School Administration Board] strongly encourage us. They just set a goal of how to teach better and make students more interested in learning. Every teacher could find their way to realize it. If you are not creative, you can just teach according to the textbook. If you have new ideas, just feel free to realize them (I. 9: 238-241).

For example, when I was going to organize experiential learning for my students. I was full of energy and proposed my idea to the school principal. When she said ‘that is great. Let us do it’, I had 200% energy to realize it. I worked all day and night. I did not care about my benefits or rewards. I just wanted to obtain the objective. If I were full of energy and proposed my idea to the school principal, and she had said ‘no, you have to think twice, I think it is ineffective,’ I would definitely not do it. I was so lucky that I have never been in that situation (I. 18: 73-81).

When working in an active workplace, teachers must show their activeness. When working in this school, I can promote all my capacities. I am creative in professional activities. Especially when I share my ideas with others, they support and give comments to me. I am happy when working in a school where the School Administration Board fully supports my work ... not only mental encouragement but also financial support. ... The principal ... also is involved in giving comments or advice to improve ideas. It makes me feel happy when working. Not many people can understand true happiness when one can work creatively. Sometimes I asked myself am I crazy, why am I enthusiastic despite being old. All my ideas and passions, which I was not able to realize previously, are now strongly supported (I. 23: 52-73)

These responses showed that the school strongly supported new ideas of teachers as long as they aimed to improve teaching and learning quality. It seems that these interviewees highly appreciated this school feature. For the case of Interviewee #18, for example, small support and encouragement of the principal ‘That is great, let us do it’ has become a significant motivation which made her feel happy to work and contribute more. This encouragement is even more significant than any reward to teachers because it shows that school leaders really trust in the teacher’s capacity. It could also increase teacher job satisfaction and work motivation. This data also reflect a high teacher autonomy in teaching and learning when they are set free to realize their innovative ideas.

Besides this, the principal frequently inspired teachers by sharing good practices and initial results to generate momentum for change. This strategy was frequently employed in the first stage of implementing the school-based curriculum:

In our school, there are many ‘crazy’ teachers. They said, ‘Today I feel fantastic.’ They told me, then I told to others. That is it (I. 26: 86-88).

When some teachers started to change the teaching and learning methods, students were more excited, and parents were more interested in it. Then it gradually disseminated. I think that I am quite good at inspiring others. For instance, when history teachers did a good job, I heard about their work, and then I shared ‘Yesterday history teachers did a good job, should we make something new?’ Subsequently, teachers shared with others and tried. When they finished, they felt happy and shared with others. It established a community naturally (I. 25: 74-79). Let us start with you and your small group, from one to one, and gradually spread out ... Then when you get more experienced, you will share with your neighbor, gradually. In this school, I am not the only one who inspires but teachers inspire others more. Indeed, it is rooted in my expectation, then I inspire others, and the new ideas spread out by themselves (I. 25: 241-250).

According to this data, the principal played an essential role in sharing good practices and inspiring innovations in the school. Although the goals were derived from her expectations, she did not impose on followers to attain them but naturally inspired good practices to increase teachers’ motivation and interest. This strategy closely links to her perspective on making gradual changes in the school. Noticeably, she did not only emphasize her primary role in creating inspiration ‘I think I am quite good at inspiring others,’ but also the role of all teachers ‘They spread out by themselves.’ In these cases, she shared her ideas with followers, facilitated their realization, and then encouraged them to share their success and experience. She understood that teachers are key change-makers, and the sharing between teachers would be more effective than only one voice from the principal. More than inspiring motives for innovation, this strategy could strengthen a community of sharing and learning between teachers to spread good practices. This data also revealed another aspect of school leadership in the context of

school autonomy that the principal's inspiration and peer sharing might be an efficient strategy to promote changes in the school community.

In short, in order to successfully implement a school-based curriculum, Green School always encourages teachers' innovative ideas as well as promotes sharing and learning good practices in teaching and learning. This school value is particularly essential since school-based curriculum development was been in its initial phases, which poses both opportunities and challenges for teachers. Teachers might have many ideas, but they might be too inexperienced to realize them. Therefore, if they were encouraged and inspired by good practices from colleagues, they would have a strong motivation to generate new ideas and apply them in regular practice.

Trading off short-time benefits for long-term gains. Observation data showed positive signals from the school's commitment to the school-based curriculum and the competency-based approach. To obtain these strategic goals, the school has planned to gradually reduce the number of students in the coming school years to attain the goal of realizing the competency-based approach. In a school meeting, a school manager reported:

The number of students is about 2,000 students..., which has reduced by 700 students. It means there were 2700-2800 students four years ago. Due to the requirements of the competency-based approach, for example, differentiated teaching and learning, if the number of students in a class was 50-60, educational quality could not be assured. Thus, we reduced the students. According to the plan, firstly we reduced to 50-55 students in a class, now there are 40 students in a class, and it will be reduced more to improve educational quality (O. 5: 37-45). During the last three years, the number of students has gone down by approximately 700 students. You can make a simple calculation; by reducing 700

students, each student contributes about 2 million VND [nearly 100 US Dollar] of tuition fees per month. How much have we lost in total? Nevertheless, we have to sacrifice short-term earnings for the long-term goal of the competency-based approach (O. 5: 88-92)

This data presented a growing problem of most public secondary schools in big cities. Due to the pressure of an increased population, the number of students in public schools is enormous and keeps increasing. Other public schools cannot decide their student admissions, but governing bodies like the DoET, BoET allocate admission quotas to each school. With the current school reputation and autonomy in student admission, Green School could attract more students to increase its budget. However, it significantly reduced the number of students to obtain the goal of the competency-based approach. This reduction could lead to a situation in which the school cannot respond to the learning needs of students and put other public schools under increased admission pressure. However, reducing student numbers seems to be an urgent requirement for the school because if it kept or increased the number of students, their funding would be more substantial, but a large class size is inappropriate for applying the new teaching and learning methods of the competency-based approach such as project-based learning, integrated learning, or differentiated learning. Consequently, with large classes, education quality might be affected, and the school could not create unique competitive advantages as well as maintain its prestige. Therefore, the school accepted reducing short-term financial benefits for the long-term goal of educational quality. This data further proved that the school did not take school autonomy as an opportunity to earn money, but its decision strongly linked to educational quality. Moreover, the feature of school autonomy might be a crucial factor in this situation. An autonomy in finance allows the school to set ambitious goals according to its financial capacity. Therefore, although the school budget

was sharply decreased due to student reduction, the school can control regular activities as well as the accomplishment of long-term goals.

To sum up, when exercising school autonomy in curriculum development, the principal applied a gradual change management strategy. Changing teachers' perceptions, setting achievable objectives, guiding teachers on how to obtain objectives, encouraging innovative ideas, and inspiring changes are useful measures to implement the school-based curriculum. Moreover, thanks to school autonomy in student admission and finance, the school reduced the number of students as well as financial income to pursue the goal of developing students' competencies.

Barriers to School-Based Curriculum

‘No one had taught us what the competency-based approach is.’

Most participants recognized that the school-based curriculum was a challenging task for both school leaders and teachers. First, teachers found it ‘very challenging’ when ‘developing a curriculum from zero’ (I. 5: 75; I. 11: 90-91) or ‘restructuring an available curriculum to form a new one’ (I. 23: 273). The principal also admitted that the school-based curriculum or the competency-based approach were a strange practices to her as well as her followers:

When I submitted the master plan for implementing a school-based curriculum I had just taken over the principal position for two months. I just had two months to devise the master plan. I had taken over the principal's position in January and submitted the master plan in March. When finishing it, I was so happy because I had learned new trends from educators, then I implemented a school-based curriculum. Then, sometimes, I felt I had failed. For example, it was at the first school meeting that I notified the teachers about the school-based curriculum. Most teachers disagreed because actually, we had no experts. I was distraught.

They did not completely disagree. I was so lucky that everybody loves me. But they pointed out potential challenges. I was worried. I had no vice-principal at that time. Therefore, I was anxious. The way ahead was vague. No one had taught us what the competency-based approach was. I started to study documents on the competency-based approach, the competency-based assessment to understand how a school-based curriculum contributes to developing students' competencies. I just understood that students have to practice, and then they can attain competencies. That is all. A lodestar arrived when I had an opportunity to visit school R. in Singapore. We had no theoretical background. No textbook, no references (I. 25: 42-59).

This quote listed several challenges to Green School when developing a school-based curriculum. The school and teachers had to exercise granted autonomy when they were not ready for it. 'The way ahead was really vague' when teachers had never developed a curriculum before, and they had no theoretical background of what a school-based curriculum is. Teachers in Vietnam have not been trained in school-based curriculum development because there is only one national curriculum, and they just apply it. Besides, external support was minimal, such as 'No textbook, no references,' 'No one had taught us what the competency-based approach is' because the school-based curriculum was a brand-new practice in Vietnam. Other research data further illustrated these challenges:

The most challenging task is how to meet the goal of students' competency development because this is a big question to most educators. Even professors and experts are still looking for the right way and have no clear idea on this approach (I. 2: 14-16).

Innovations towards competency-based assessment have been not remarkably fostered. We are still finding the way. We are the first people in this field (O. 2: 274-276).

These responses showed that school-based curriculum development was an overload of work for the school when teachers have no expertise and experience in this field. The data also indicated the shortcoming that MoET decided to experiment with a new approach when having no technique preparation or resources for changes. For example, as teachers were not trained in curriculum development but investigated it by themselves, ‘every teacher had a different viewpoint regarding school-based curriculum’ (I. 12: 36). Interviewee #23 admitted that in the first stage of curriculum development, ‘everything was such a hotpot’ (I. 23: 275-276). This situation raised the quality of the school-based curriculum as a matter of concern.

Second, another challenge was ‘how to make teachers think out of the box and stay updated regarding new ideas on curriculum development’ (I. 3: 57-59). For example, one mathematics teacher felt confused about how to apply the competency-based approach in his subject:

The competency-based approach firstly means students can apply knowledge in practice. By solving practical issues, they acquire competencies. It is an answer to the question of ‘what is learning for.’ What is learning mathematics for? It is such an awkward question. Thus, we have to design practical exercises and sometimes integrated-subject exercises. [...]. However, it is challenging to design practical exercises in Mathematics because there is a big gap between mathematical knowledge and practice. Students have to learn a lot to know the application of knowledge. Mathematics in secondary schools should equip students with a general foundation rather than separate lessons (I. 1: 118-130).

In this interview, the teacher supported a change to a competency-based approach, but he was of two minds between the goal of knowledge transmission and students' competency development. The quote might reflect a long-established perception that teaching mathematics in particular and other 'key subjects' in general mainly aims to provide students with a general foundation of theoretical knowledge and to prepare for tests. Therefore, teachers have no idea how to apply mathematics knowledge to deal with practical issues and to develop students' competencies as they have never been trained or observed the competency-based approach in instructional practice before. In short, to successfully implement a school-based curriculum, teachers should be thoroughly trained, and it took time to change their perceptions from a test-oriented education to a competency-based approach.

Next, because teachers have no experience, they were not able to foresee what a school-based curriculum would be. They just investigated and tried at the same time. One interviewee admitted: 'One difficulty is we could not estimate how a new curriculum would be. We had to revise many times' (I. 12: 40-41). This situation could have a detrimental effect on the stability of the school curriculum. Moreover, any modification in the school curriculum would lead to changes in other relevant documents, for example:

Sometimes every month, we introduce a new version of the curriculum; thus, we have to update a new teaching schedule and prepare for new teaching and learning plans (I. 2: 173-175).

My subject is delivered in 40 weeks per academic year. We have to select and fill learning content into every week, every learning topic, and every lesson. That is the most challenging task when we must carefully consider learning content.

Moreover, we must add in more detail to teaching and learning plans (I. 1: 70-75)

The most challenging task is preparing for teaching and learning plans. We must take every word into account. It is time-consuming, and we must be cautious. A senior teacher like me must carefully prepare texts and presentations (I. 20: 94-96).

It could be seen that curriculum development has significantly increased teachers' workload when they must develop a school curriculum on the one hand and prepare for new teaching documents on the other hand. The teaching and learning plan, for example, must be newly composed to match with the new curriculum structure and learning objectives. In this case, Green School could gain initial achievements when enjoying school autonomy in curriculum development because it had excellent teachers and an effective transformation strategy. However, a caution might be that school autonomy in the curriculum could not be widely implemented in all secondary schools, especially ones with weak resources, low-quality staff, and inadequate preparation.

A gap between curriculum and teaching and learning practice.

When curriculum development was finished, most interviewees reflected on their struggles in applying the school-based curriculum as well as the competency-based approach in practice. Research data showed that a lack of teachers' experience emerges as the first barrier. Teachers recognized that 'we have heard a lot from experts, but it would be very different when applying them [new teaching methods] in classroom practice' (O. 2: 138-139). In a teacher training session, one teacher admitted her difficulties:

It is very unreasonable when teachers list all core competencies in all teaching plans, but their classroom activities do not link or orient to competency development. We renovate teaching and learning that every question must aim to achieve learning objectives that you set at first. It could not be like when I made observations, I saw that your teaching and learning process was the same as the

textbook, you set competency development objectives, you listed all eight competencies, but all teaching and learning activities did not contribute to any competency (O. 18: 17-19 ... 43-48)

To tell the truth, I know that sometimes and somewhere, teachers talk and chalk during the whole period. They raised questions like ‘Please let me know what the definition is,’ ‘Please take a look at the textbook and answer the question of how many steps there are in that experiment?’ I do not think we can teach like that today. More terribly, there is no question during the whole period. Most terribly, there are many questions, but they do not contribute to forming any competency (O. 18: 32-38).

Interview data from teachers further confirmed this situation:

When I organized learning activities, I foresaw what competency could be gained. For example, in this delivery, I expected to develop self-study, teamwork, and communication competencies. There are skills associated with these competencies, for example, critical thinking, and disputation. That is in terms of theory. However, from theory to practice, sometimes there are many [hesitates and stops here] (I. 2: 29-34).

Green School applied the competency-based approach with a strong focus on eight competency groups. However, it was unreasonable and unfeasible when teachers ‘listed all eight competencies’ in a teaching plan. ‘All teaching and learning activities did not contribute to any competency.’ It means that although teachers were aware of the competency-based approach, they were not able to realize it in classroom practice. The hesitation ‘But from theory to practice, sometimes there are many ...’ might prove a gap between the teachers’ perceptions and his teaching practice. In fact, teachers just added learning objectives regarding competency development in the teaching plan to meet

school requirements and maintained the traditional teaching and learning methods of the teacher-centered approach like lecturing or inquiry-based learning. Another teacher presented a similar practice:

We must change the teaching and learning methods. We agreed to the competency-based approach. It means we raise questions, discuss, we present [learning content] on the projector screen, we raise questions and let students answer. We aimed to let them be creative. These methods are the competency-based approach ... We aim to do that, but we have not attained it yet. It should take time because it is a process. (I. 12: 73-81)

In this case, the interviewee labeled his recent changes in teaching and learning methods as a competency-based approach ‘we raise questions, discuss, we present [learning content] on the projector screen, ... let students answer ... let them be creative’. In comparison to the traditional practice of teaching mathematics, which primarily applied a lecturing method, these changes could be substantial to the interviewee. However, this response reflected a misunderstanding of the competency-based approach because these changes are not a competency-based approach, but just a turn to focus more on students’ learning. On a positive side, the teacher realized that ‘we have not attained it yet’ and kept trying to apply the competency-based approach better.

Second, the competency-based approach and its new teaching and learning methods required a lot of time and resources to be implemented. Although the school increased instructional time, teachers reflected that it was insufficient to apply new teaching and learning methods, for instance:

The amount of learning time for project-based learning is limited (O. 2: 80).

Although teachers set several objectives of competency development, the allocated learning time of the curriculum is not enough to acquire the competencies. Thus, the objectives remain on paper (I. 20: 134-135)

First, they are new. Second, they are time-consuming. When we teach traditionally, we teach theory, and it is an old pathway. Now if we change, it takes time, it takes effort (I. 5: 331-333)

Project-based learning is fascinating but time-consuming. To finish one project, we need not only one or two sessions of working on-campus. It takes one period to introduce the project and expected results, instruct students, and assign work. Then it takes several weeks to run the project. Students work in groups both on-campus and off-campus. Finally, it takes one or two more sessions for students to report outcomes and products. It is such a long process (I. 8: 13-19).

I realized that the pros of these methods [project-based learning, problem-based learning] are promoting students' capacities and creativity. However, I admire Ms. V. [who succeeded in applying project-based learning] because she can mobilize financial support. I know that one project's costs are considerable. Moreover, I know that teaching one project-based learning session is very time-consuming. It is likely that teachers' work in class is easy and free but in fact, it was very hard to organize student activities to finish one project. Thus, I think we should only apply project-based learning in some key learning topics (O. 2: 223-229).

These quotes proved that new teaching and learning methods associated with the competency-based approach could not be widely applied because it required plenty of effort, time, and financial support. Teachers' workload has markedly increased when they had to prepare a lot for new teaching and learning methods. They must also perform new tasks such as mobilizing financial support for learning projects because the school had no

budget for learning projects at the classroom level. For the above reasons, it could be concluded that although teachers were eager to innovate teaching and learning, they could hesitate due to many barriers. Hence, innovations toward the competency-based approach were just initiated in young and enthusiastic teachers and could be applied only in some selected learning topics.

Third, the implementation of the school-based curriculum was limited by school infrastructure. ‘A large number of students in one class’ was an enormous obstacle to innovative teaching and learning methods (O. 2: 59-60, 198; I. 6: 564-565). One teacher shared her experience ‘when organizing group work, the ideal number of students in one group should be four. However, I had to organize one class into six student groups’ (O. 2: 55-57). Another teacher added (I. 6: 574-577):

Previously there were 50 students in one class. The number of students was reduced to 40 at this time. Even 40 students in one small class, it is unfeasible.

There is no room for students just to move or change their position during learning hours. Also, it creates noise which affects to other classes.

It is interpreted that arranging 40 to 50 students in one class is a prevalent practice in most public schools in big cities since the number of public schools is inadequate. Therefore, teachers in these public schools can only apply teaching and learning methods such as lecturing. However, for Green School, this feature might be a significant barrier to the competency-based approach, which requires an ample classroom space to exercise a wide variety of teaching and learning activities such as group work.

Another limitation of Green School was a lack of infrastructure and learning space for educational activities (I. 6: 578-581; O. 2: 65-67; I. 22: 148). Due to ‘lack of equipment in the laboratory room, students study academic knowledge but have no chance to observe or practice’ (I. 22: 128-129). ‘Improving school facilities’ was also the

expectation of other teachers. One chemistry teacher reported ‘Equipment for teaching and learning is insufficient. To make a teaching report, I have to use my cell phone to take photos of students’ products’ (O. 2: 66-67). These shortages might be attributed to the fact that Green School is self-financed, and it has many other spending needs to focus on.

These findings reflected two main internal limitations of schools that restrain teachers from experimenting and applying innovative teaching and learning methods toward the competency-based approach. In the next few years, these limitations would not be quickly removed because reducing the number of students must be gradual according to the master plan, and the school is not able to immediately modernize and upgrade infrastructure.

Teaching to the test.

Research data showed that teaching to the test was an enormous obstacle to the school-based curriculum. First, there was the paradox that school innovations were put in the context of a test-oriented education. Although the school enjoyed autonomy in curriculum development and instructional practice, it must comply with the national assessment framework regulated by the MoET. Teachers described their situation:

Eventually, we must teach and learn to take the test. Competency-based teaching and learning could develop students’ competencies, but the competency-based assessment has not been applied yet. Thus, if I keep applying innovative teaching and learning methods, how about my students’ academic performance? (O. 2: 229-233).

It seems to be unreasonable if one argues that students just need to learn well. If there were neither tests nor exams, students would not study ... If we just change the curriculum and enhance group activities, students might be happier but gain no

knowledge. Therefore, changing teaching and learning in mathematics is a matter of concern to me, but it is challenging. It is unacceptable when good learning does not lead to a good test result. Besides, if we want to gain good test results, we must learn and practice. That is an unavoidable fact (I. 1: 110-116).

Competency-based approach, it is unlikely that we are not interested in it or we are not able to apply it. However, our students have to take tests and exams. They must achieve excellent academic performance to apply to universities. If we want students to get good marks in tests regulated by the Ministry or the Department, we have to practice those forms (I. 14: 126-131).

These responses reflected one typical teachers' perception in a long-established test-oriented education that emphasizes 'final output' like grades, ranking, and academic achievement. It could be seen that although teachers enthusiastically supported the competency-based approach as well as innovations in teaching and learning, they were seriously concerned about students' results in high-stakes exams. The question 'if I keep applying innovative teaching and learning methods, how about my students' academic performance?' raised a fundamental dilemma on the goal of teaching and learning in the context of the school-based curriculum. On the one hand, teachers expected to apply new teaching and learning methods to obtain the goal of developing students' competencies. On the other hand, teaching and learning in the school must well prepare for students to attain high academic performance and succeed in high-stakes exams. Teachers clearly understood that these exams are especially important to students because they are the only opportunity to be admitted into a higher level of education. Their students must fiercely compete with their peers in high-stakes exams. If teachers pay too much attention to the objective of competency development, their students might get lower grades in exams. Therefore, students' test results, rather than their obtained competencies, are the most

crucial output reflecting the quality of the teaching and learning process. If students' performance is low, teachers will get lower salaries and the school's reputation might be unavoidably damaged. For these practical reasons, teachers must give more priority to the goal of teaching to the test than students' competency development.

Second, research data further illustrated the gap between school autonomy in school-based curriculum development and test-oriented education. Participants recognized one barrier to the competency-based approach in that the current high-stakes exams focused too much on testing students' theoretical knowledge while ignoring assessing their competencies. In the break period of one training session, teachers reflected their view on the dilemma between teaching and learning and assessment (O. 12: 98-124):

Teacher 1: When I was in high school, we learned and practiced at the same time. Thus, I have remembered knowledge for forty or fifty years. Now you [teachers] do not teach them how to practice. Students of Grade 12 are not able to wire electric.

Teacher 2: (making a joke) But they can solve test exercises quickly (laugh). They learn physics knowledge by heart. That is why they are afraid of learning. I think we made the wrong decisions, which leads to many consequences.

Teacher 1: I learned Grade 6 sixty years ago, but I can remember how to operate on a fish or a frog. Now all knowledge is academic.

Teacher 3: Sometimes, Mr. N and I feel very annoyed. I have to recognize that teaching and learning are strongly impacted by assessment. The test is tough; sometimes, we have to learn some mathematics knowledge to deal with physics exercises.

Teacher 2: But it is even not real mathematics knowledge. It is very tricky, puzzling, and complicated but not able to assess students' competencies.

Teacher 1: Assessment puzzles students.

Teacher 2: I think this phenomenon is such a part of our blood. It reflects an education of learning for testing. ... Students can deal with tests quickly, but they cannot become human. I wish we could make a balance between pragmatism and educational purposes. We teach students to become people whom we are expected to become. Students can get good marks on exams, but they cannot understand the nature of knowledge.

This conversation might suggest that teaching to the test is a worrying problem in the education system. It seems high-stakes exams negatively changed teaching and learning practice to the purpose of test preparation. Exams were increasingly 'tricky, puzzling, and complicated' forcing students to hone their test-taking skills. Consequently, students can quickly deal with tests and get good marks in exams, but they are afraid of learning. Students learned knowledge by heart but could not understand the nature of knowledge nor apply knowledge to practice. Another teacher added:

We have applied multiple-choice tests for nine years, but I absolutely do not support it. Students learn and then forget immediately (O. 12: 154-155).

In this response, the teacher mentioned multiple-choice tests that have become a controversial matter in recent years. Since the introduction of multiple-choice tests in most key subjects, students preferred learning tips and tricks to finish tests as fast as possible, but they forgot the knowledge immediately. In other words, test-oriented education could be a constraint on school autonomy and ruin every school effort to implement the competency-based approach.

In addition, it was considered that constant changes in the national examination in recent years forced all schools and students into a passive situation. One teacher shared his struggle:

The assessment might be the biggest problem. We are on the edge between the old and new forms of assessment. Even teachers are confused about the sudden changes. We now have no clear picture of the coming exam while we have to practice old exercises. I heard that the new test might change up to 70% of the structure and content. I am not sure that I can adequately prepare for this change. Although there is a general schedule plan, I still feel overloaded (I. 5: 133-138).

This response reflected the opinion that the MoET changing of the forms of assessment every year represented a shortcoming. This interview was conducted in February 2016, which was just four months before the national graduation examination, but all teachers and students received no official notification from the MoET on the examination. Teachers were not informed of how the test would be or how they could respond to sudden changes in assessment. This practice posed a considerable challenge to both teachers and students under circumstances where they might be very passive regarding assessment changes. Being under this stress, teachers could have no room for remaking teaching and learning practices.

Third, teaching to the test was more serious in situations where both students and parents only emphasized the goal of attaining high academic performance and test results. These two mathematics teachers, who while in spite of being enthusiastic about innovating instructional practice, admitted:

Mathematics is a key subject of every exam and accounts for a large amount of learning time in school education. Parents pay close attention to the subject. They do not care about how good their students are at other subjects, whereas if

students' performance in math is weak, parents might be sad and worried. Thus, we are very stressed (I. 1: 97-100).

Mathematics has limited application to practice because it means only practicing exercises and taking tests. As that is the need of society, the school and teachers must respond' (I. 9: 272-275).

Teachers recognized that the burning need for parents was that the school and teachers must make every effort to best prepare their children for high-stakes exams. Parents only cared about their children's grade point average or grade and ranking in tests and exams. Therefore, they were likely to oppose any school innovations that was not linked to test preparation.

If I add more learning content that aims at developing student competencies while test and exams remain unchanged, parents might react aggressively. They might say that their children gain nothing from this teaching and learning approach, while test results are only 1 2 3 4¹⁶ (I. 9: 317-320)

It is not because they do not know, but they think it is time-consuming, and they are afraid of it affecting test preparation (O. 2: 271-272).

This response showed that parents did not support the competency-based approach. They might not fully understand the approach, or even if they have understood, they might not risk their children's future. Similarly, for students, due to the enormous pressure of tests and exams, they 'cope with severe stress' when there are four main exams during one academic year (I. 1: 90). Although students might be interested in new teaching and learning methods, they are aware that the most crucial goal is to prepare for the tests. For example:

¹⁶ School system in Vietnam applies a ten-point scale. In this sentence, it means low results.

There is a big gap between the goal of competency-based development and the expectation of students. Now students just pay attention to lessons relating to tests, and we are taking the exam very soon, you [teachers] keep teaching me irrelevant things. The learning objectives of teachers and students are different (I. 2: 34-37).

This interview was done when the national exam was fast approaching. When the teacher introduced a lesson that was not included in the exam, students did not pay attention to learning because they just wanted to practice exercises and sharpen test skills. Observation data further revealed the vast influence of high-stakes exams on teaching and learning practice.

Teacher 1: I expect a balance. I agree that we should respond to the need of society. Especially, Grade 10, 11 might be chances for making a change because the pressure has not been severe.

Teacher 2: [Making changes in] lower secondary education is easiest because knowledge is not much, and pressure is less considerable. However, I teach Grade 12 only with much pressure. If students get low marks on just one test, I might 'die' (O. 12: 75-79).

I know that new ideas are always challenging. I experiment and learn at the same time. ... I know that it [project-based learning] considerably develops students' competencies. However, students must take the test. I am concerned a lot about this. Therefore, I design projects in lower secondary education because my subject is not included in high stake examinations. My lead teacher assigned me to design projects for Grade 11 students, but I did not dare to do it because my students would 'die' immediately. I have to tell the truth that it is extremely tough. Even in

lower secondary education, I must provide the necessary knowledge to study in higher grades (O. 2: 246-258).

In another training course, one teacher admitted:

In Green School, we did not overhaul Grade 12 ... Even when you make changes in Grade 11 and problems occur, consequences would ensue in Grade 12. Because Grade 12 students must take the national examination, changes should be realized in Grade 10 or 11. If everything is fine, no problem. However, if there are problems, Grade 12 students must suffer the consequences. In lower secondary education, you can feel free to make any changes (O. 12: 206-211).

In the first and second quotation, there seems to have been an unwritten rule that teaching and learning innovations should be implemented in lower secondary education where there is less pressure on teaching to the test. In upper secondary education, due to the considerable pressure of high-stake exams, innovations for Grade 12 were highly restricted, and those for Grade 10 and 11 should be taken into careful consideration because any small change might affect students' test preparation. Consequently, the competency-based approach has less opportunity to be applied in the teaching and learning practice of upper secondary classes.

From the data, it could be concluded that although the school and teachers wholeheartedly supported the competency-based approach, they cannot resist the influence of test-based education. School autonomy in curriculum development or teaching and learning seemed not to have any affect if it was not associated with school autonomy in the assessment. In the context of current high-stakes exams and social perception of teaching to the test, it was challenging for the school-based curriculum and the competency-based approach to be widely implemented. These results might support the hypothesis that school autonomy was not able to make any remarkable impact on

teaching and learning innovations if there was no change in the national assessment framework and social perceptions on testing and assessment.

Governing bodies.

Participants offered their reflections that direct governing bodies, including the DoET and BoET, are the most formidable barrier to the school-based curriculum in particular and school practice in general. First, teachers reported that governing bodies did not support innovations in teaching and learning:

If teachers want to renovate, the school might agree, but I am not sure the DoET and BoET support that idea (I. 9: 278-279).

When I apply [project-based learning] in the class, sometimes observers [governing bodies] did not support my method. They argued that if teachers did not present any knowledge, how students could understand lessons. Although I explained that before this teaching and learning session, students had to prepare a lot, it was quite hard to gain support from them (O. 2: 237-243).

In this situation, the teacher applied project-based learning, in which students had to investigate and finish a project relating to a particular learning topic. As students played a central role in the teaching and learning process, teachers turned to design learning activities, facilitating, and supporting the students. During a teaching and learning session in the classroom, teachers seemed to work less actively since they did not deliver the lecture in a traditional manner. Therefore, governing authority judged that teachers did not meet the requirements of teaching ‘if teachers did not present any knowledge, how can students understand the lesson.’ In fact, both teachers and students had to work very hard to prepare for a learning project. Students were excited about learning because they could gain not only knowledge but also many useful learning skills. This situation showed a gap between governing bodies’ perception and educational

practices in school. When the school-based curriculum and competency-based approach were new practices, and education changes occurred continuously in schools, governing bodies consistently maintained a conservative mindset (O. 2: 242). One interviewee even made a joke ‘if it [curriculum] changes so fast, they [inspectors] may be unfamiliar with the change’ (I. 5: 78-79).

Consequently, interviewees argued that the tight control of governing bodies prevent teachers from initiating innovations’ (I. 3: 132-134; I. 18: 164-165). When teachers or professional groups had new ideas, they had to make detailed explanations for ‘accountability to governing bodies’ (I. 6: 503-505). One teacher reported:

We must keep safety first. If teachers have an innovative idea, but governing bodies cannot understand it, they [teachers] will be demotivated. Then they turn out that ‘I should not have proposed anything’ (O. 6: 36-38).

It could be seen that teachers were stuck between their innovative ideas and the resistance of governing bodies. Because public school teachers were traditionally considered to have the least power in a top-down school management system, they tended to accept the judgment of higher authority to avoid conflict or undesired consequences instead of voicing opinions to protect their ideas. Therefore, if governing bodies did not support new ideas, teachers would be discouraged to create new ideas. This data reflected a big gap between school practice and governing bodies’ understanding as well as a strong hierarchical relationship among teachers, school, and governing authority.

Second, according to Interviewee 9: 275-281, there was a lack of a clear and unified direction between governing bodies. While national authority (MoET) allowed Green School to realize a school-based curriculum on the one hand, local authorities like DoET and BoET maintained their local regulations, which did not support innovations on

the other hand. For example, if MoET and DoET greatly encouraged the teacher to realize innovative ideas, BoET did not (I. 9: 284-286). One teacher commented:

It is very miserable when we [teachers] do very well, but we are always under the control of the Bureau and the Department. No matter what creativity and innovation there is, we have to comply with their regulations. This situation is likely to be very complicated. They did not care whether we teach well or not. They just concluded that ‘Your teaching and learning plan is not up to standard’ (I. 6: 193-198).

In this situation, the teacher’s creativity and innovation might be praised by the MoET or DoET but sharply criticized by the BoET just because it was not ‘up to standard.’ BoET maintained long-established local regulations and standards that were not compatible with school innovations. Due to the dilemma between national and local regulations, Green School teachers might be discouraged from making changes and innovations.

Third, observation data showed that governing bodies might be a barrier to the school-based curriculum when they merely focused on academic achievement rather than students’ competency development. In one teacher meeting to prepare for the upcoming upper secondary education entrance examination, the principal directed teachers (O. 3: 20-26):

I had participated in two meetings in BoET. In the last school year, our students’ literature mark was lower than that of other schools ... It is suggested that literature teachers should devote more effort to improving student performance. The Director of the BoET has said that ‘No matter how you [schools] do it, the result must accurately reflect the school capacity.’

This quote hinted that there might be an invisible pressure from governing bodies to schools in terms of preparing students for the tests: ‘No matter how schools do it, the result must accurately reflect the school capacity.’ In the Vietnamese context, this sentence could be interpreted such that schools must do their best to ensure that their students attain the highest test result. The better the students’ test result is, the higher the school performance is. This situation might linked to the ‘achievement disease’ where BoET expected that schools under their management could get good results in the examination as proof of their excellent management. When the school and teachers must focus on improving students’ test results to respond to the expectation of governing bodies, the goal of students’ competency development might be undervalued.

Last but not least, as governing bodies were not informed of recent innovations, they were not able to provide professional advice and turned much attention to administrative rather than professional issues (O. 3: 96-101; O. 4: 129-145). Most respondents reported that this control was too rigid and unreasonable (I. 22: 118-119, 126; I. 6: 189-199). For example:

I just want that because they are governing bodies, they should have a macro view. They should say ‘I think this is not good, you could improve by something to make it better.’ Please do not focus on tiny things. In the teaching schedule report, a teacher wrote Week 20 [the end of the first semester]. The next week was the beginning of the second semester, and she wrote Week 1. It means the first week of the second semester. They [inspectors] queried ‘It is unacceptable. I have never seen cardinal numbers going from 21 to 1’. I think they did not understand on purpose. Teachers were not at fault in this case. Finally, they ranked us as having weak performance (I. 26: 254-264).

Yesterday there was a meeting at our school. It could be the most terrible meeting in my life. ... Ms. A [an officer from BoET] opened by saying that ‘The Green School has made many good results, but today I have very little time to talk about good points but your limitations only.’ (O. 4: 400 - 406).

Because governing bodies do not work every day every hour with us, they cannot understand what we have made from deep passion and dedication. When visiting the school, they just check administrative documents. Our activities did were not revealed in those documents. Finally, they concluded that we did nothing (O. 4: 455-459)

This morning I had a meeting at the DoET. Ms. A talked to me, ‘I was afraid that you [the principal] were upset.’ I said, ‘Yes, you are right. I felt upset and self-pitying’. ‘Why do you feel self-pity?’ she asked. ‘Because my teachers and I have made every effort every day, every hour. However, what we had to get in the last meeting was very bitter. Because you had no time to talk about good things, your whole speech was ‘terrible,’ ‘even a cleaner can do it,’ ‘even a school guard can do it’. Nevertheless, I was mistaken, and governing bodies have the authority to penalize. They required me to submit an accountability report, and I promised that I would submit it on next Wednesday. ... When I left the meeting, another DoET officer said something to me. Please let me not share that conversation because it was excruciating. However, Ms. H [one DoET officer] said to me, ‘Dear A. [the school principal], I am sure that there might be a paradox somewhere. Because my nephew is studying in your school. His father, his mother, and his grandfather have never complained about the school. They are even delighted that their son can study here’ ... We can make great things. When the whole society criticizes the education system, some are recognizing us (O. 4: 459-481).

These responses reflected the fact that BoET seemed to ‘focus on tiny things’ only, and sometimes, its supervision was unreasonable. It spent ‘less time to talk about good points but only limitations’ in terms of fulfilling documents. It did not recognize teachers’ efforts and achievements, which ‘have been made from passion and dedication’ but criticized small errors in administrative matters. In most responses, the interviewee intentionally contrasted fruitful achievements of school innovations such as students’ satisfaction and parent’s recognition with severe criticism of BoET: ‘what we’ve got in the last meeting was really bitter,’ ‘I felt so upset and self-pitying,’ ‘it was excruciating.’ It is hard to conclude in this case whether BoET’s negative scrutiny was on purpose or whether they just acted according to law and regulations. However, it was apparent that the interviewees disagreed and were disappointed with the BoET’s criticism. Teachers expected that governing bodies should provide professional advice or support to the school rather than checking administrative fulfillment and pointing out teachers’ mistakes only. One explanation might be that traditionally governing bodies used to control and lead public schools under authority in a hierarchical structure. When the school enjoys autonomy, the role of governing bodies might decrease, and they might try to maintain their power and influence by scrutinizing and criticizing errors.

Interview data further illustrates the tension between teachers and governing bodies:

If you [interviewer] has a chance to talk with the Director of the DoET, please convey to him that self-managed schools receive no cent from the state budget, so why do you [governing bodies] inspect them so many times? (I. 26: 239-241)

Although our school is labeled ‘autonomous,’ they [inspectors] expressed no satisfaction with our work and reproved teachers as usual’ (I. 5: 75-77)

This quote illustrated a typical argument about school autonomy that if governing bodies did not subsidize the school, they should respect school autonomy in making school decisions and pay less attention to administrative issues. Although teachers did not directly contend with governing bodies, they were not completely satisfied with these external interventions. This data also hinted at the problem that there should be another effective accountability mechanism alternative to the current regular checking and inspection. Interestingly, when talking about governing bodies, two teachers used the metaphor of ‘top-down and bottom-up revolution’:

Now the MoET is piloting the school-based curriculum; thus, we can apply the competency-based assessment ... However, I think the problem arises from local governing bodies, the DoET and BoET. Like Mr. S said ‘safety first’... When I worked with foreign experts, they were of the view that local governing bodies made the main barriers. There are two options, first, a top-down revolution by official decisions, we must implement... Second, a bottom-up revolution means teachers gradually make changes, and then they make substantive changes. However, if there is still the local authority, the bottom-up revolution will fail (O. 6: 27-46).

I suppose that there should be two revolutions. The first is the top-down revolution via the macro policy of the government. The second is the bottom-up revolution. ... These two revolutions should be combined to make radical changes. If there top-down changes only, the local will implement national policies ineffectively. In contrast, if the local makes marked improvements, a rigid mechanism might inhibit teachers’ creativity. I believe that we cannot be successful if we do not combine these two revolutions. ... Many of MoET’s

policies do not make significant changes because teachers do not commit to them.

The need for renovation must arise from teachers (I. 8: 156-176).

According to the teachers, regulations, which were officially promulgated from governing bodies to schools, were a ‘top-down revolution.’ In contrast, innovative ideas of teachers and schools play the role of a ‘bottom-up revolution.’ The success of education reforms depended on the combination of these two revolutions. If governing bodies do not provide support for school-based initiatives, teachers’ creativity will be destroyed. It could be inferred that teachers want to innovate teaching and learning practices, and they expect enthusiastic support for this from governing bodies.

In short, a lack of expertise in innovative approaches, focusing much on administrative issues, a lack of synchronicity between governing bodies, and pressure from ‘achievement syndrome’ made governing bodies one main obstacle to school autonomy in general and school-based curriculum in particular. The intervention of governing bodies decreased teachers’ work satisfaction and their motivation to renovate teaching and learning. These findings provided support for the hypothesis that school autonomy would be only a label and cannot lead to any innovative improvement if governing bodies continue to deeply intervene in school activities.

Theme 2. Performance-Based Pay

The following theme analyzes and discusses performance-based pay as one typical strategy of school autonomy in finance and personnel management. Green School exercised its autonomy to develop a personnel management system that was remarkably different from other public secondary schools. It applied a teacher appraisal system, including students’ test results, students’ feedback, peer-review, and the School Administration Board’s evaluation. These teacher appraisal results were then correlated to the performance-based pay system.

Teacher Appraisal

Students' test results.

The first factor of the teacher appraisal system was students' test results. The school publicized students' results of semester tests, grade point averages for the semester, and results in high-stakes tests as important indicators reflecting teacher performance. Teachers shared their perspectives regarding this issue:

Informing us of student test results is also a measure for me to look back on my teaching and to adjust my teaching. Teachers have to prepare for and be concerned with students' learning (I. 1: 95-97).

The student test results are the final output of teaching and learning. I think it is just relative but necessary ... The result reflects a whole teaching and learning process. If the result is very high at the beginning of the semester but lowers in the end, teachers must look at themselves. In my school, students' results in national exams are public. Although it is only a source of reference, it might be beneficial to teachers. They look at that result, they know their students' results, and they might be unsatisfied with that result. Although no one says it, the teacher might know what he or she needs to do in the next year. No need to be noisy, no need to call upon any one, no need to criticize ... They will be aware of it themselves (I. 3: 325-327 ... 338-349).

Everything can be said, and there must be the students' test results. The result reflects the teaching quality of teachers. If there were no test results, teacher appraisal would lead to the same result for all. Thanks to test results, managers can easily monitor the progress of teachers when comparing results: are the test results of this semester higher or lower than that of the previous one, do the test results meet education requirements and school objectives, how many students got

low marks. These questions are also matters of concern for teachers. If they do not pay attention to these factors, they might leave some weak students behind (I. 3: 366-373)

To prepare for the next national exam, we will organize two mock tests. To track the progress of students, we will save the test results from all mock tests and the official one ... The result of the official test is the most accurate reflection of your [teacher's] work. You will be delighted if your students are successful. Sometimes you have to improve your teaching when students might get good marks in mock tests but fail in the national one (O. 3: 157-166)

In the context of a test-oriented education in which academic performance and test results are the primary concerns of parents and students, the school must manage teachers' performance by controlling these final outputs. It could be seen that although teachers considered the result as just 'relative' and 'a source of reference,' they recognized its positive impacts on their teaching. When being informed of student results, teachers can make a self-assessment of their teaching, compare their class to other classes, and make improvements for the next semester, for example, focusing more on weak students. The test results became an underlying motive that always orients and reminds teachers of the ultimate objective of improving student performance in tests and exams. In addition, 'if there is no test result, teacher appraisal would lead to the same result for all.' It signifies that the teacher understood it as a tool that can objectively evaluate their performance and differentiate teacher efforts. This idea would be very different from the tenure-based appraisal system in public schools where teachers were familiar with the same performance results for all. For school managers, students' test results were the most visible indicator reflecting the quality of teachers' teaching. Another advantage of this method was it could create more autonomy for teachers in their

teaching when the school reduced daily interventions and focused heavily and exclusively on the final result, for example:

Being different from other public schools, our Green School conducted a ‘hidden’ appraisal based on students’ results. Although the school did not officially state it, it is an appraisal indicator. The school did not look at how teachers compose teaching plans but instead at students’ results (I. 22: 15-18).

However, there might be several problems arising from this situation. First, when students’ test results are one key indicator, it could exacerbate an achievement syndrome in which teachers and students are under severe pressure from teaching and learning to get higher grades and ranking in tests. The goal of developing students’ competencies then might be affected negatively. Second, comparing students’ test results among classes cannot precisely reflect teachers’ efforts because it depends on other factors such as student capacity. Third, although no teacher was strongly opposed to this method, broadcasting student results too widely might cause adverse reactions in the psychology of teachers, for example, being ashamed of one’s low performance. Fourth, as the school only scrutinized public semester test results and grade point averages, one likely outcome might be that teachers are indulgent towards students in regular classroom assessments to increase their grade point average. However, this is a scarce possibility because teachers would be aware of its adverse consequences for students and for their reputation.

Students’ reflections.

Green School was one of the few public secondary schools that delivered students’ feedback questionnaires twice per semester to explore students’ opinions of the work of teachers in classes (I. 5: 141-142). One teacher described it thus:

Regarding school autonomy, ... students’ feedback questionnaires are also essential... There are many ways of reflection: students report to parents, or

sometimes students report to their homeroom teachers, sometimes parents directly report to the school principal. If the subject teachers made problems, parents even call the school principal or vice-principal. School management, thus, would be stricter, and students have greater rights. After every semester, students can use their rights by finishing the questionnaire (I. 3: 179-186).

This teacher argued that in a school autonomy context, the school highly valued students' opinions and gave them many chances to express themselves via parents, homeroom teachers, and questionnaires. This practice might indicate a school effort to manage the teaching and learning process as well as to increase the preciseness of teacher appraisal results. Aside from the students' test results as a traditional source of information, students' reflections could be a useful supplement as well. If the former can only be collected at the end of the semester, students' opinions could reflect teaching and learning practice more frequently and in a timelier manner, for example 'if subject teachers made problems, parents even call the school principal or vice-principal.' Moreover, it could be interpreted that Green School respected students' voices in school practice. Students can enjoy more autonomy than their peers in other public schools because they can reflect on problems relating to learning. It could be noted that allowing students to assess their teachers was uncommon in the context of a Confucian cultural heritage that gives especial respect to the superior role of teachers and maintains a hierarchical teacher-student relationship (see Chapter 3. Teaching and learning in Confucian heritage culture).

First, many teachers reported that students' reflections were accurate and made positive impacts on their work:

The questionnaire result is somewhat accurate because it represents the voices of many students. It correctly reflects teachers' competencies. In this school, teachers must balance teaching knowledge and students' emotions. (I. 5: 142-144).

Good teaching is only one side; teacher-student cooperation is another side. If teachers deliver an excellent lecture, but students cannot understand, the teaching is meaningless, and students will undoubtedly tick 'Difficult to understand.' This tool is fascinating. It reflects human interactions. Knowledge is very rigid, whereas teacher-student relations are vivid. Therefore, in addition to teaching knowledge, I pay more attention to teacher-student cooperation (I. 9: 191-197).

Teaching in Green School requires more art and diversity than those in other public schools. In public schools, teachers just need 'one-way' teaching. However, in this school, if teachers do not interact with students and if students are not excited with the lesson, teachers might fail (I. 5: 41-44)

These quotations revealed that the feedback of students changed teachers' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Interviewee #5 mentioned a prevalent practice of 'one-way teaching' in public schools where a good teacher was the one who performed good teaching and transmitted profound knowledge to students. In addition to this, teachers in Green School must also pay attention to developing a positive relationship with students. 'Good teaching is only one side; teacher-student cooperation is another side.' These responses further proved a transition from the teacher-centered to the student-centered approach in teaching and learning practice. It could be suggested that more than being a contributing indicator to evaluate teachers' work, students' reflections have improved student-teacher relationships as well as teaching practice.

Second, the result of students' feedback was one significant source for teachers to modify their teaching to respond to students' features and expectations:

It [students' reflections] makes teachers always be perfect role models for students, be innovative, and aware of how to both care for student emotions and teach them well to get high performance (I. 5: 144-146)

If students give negative feedback, teachers must make a self-assessment first because there might be some reasons behind that response (I. 23, 350-353).

The most accurate assessor is students. They assess us [teachers] anywhere and anytime. Thus, I have to make continuous efforts and do my best (I. 13: 172-174)

Yes, I have to change and modify instantly. If there is a class that reported a low result, I have to raise questions on why. If the problem might be my expression, I have to improve it. It is interesting that if there were no student feedback, I would not know how good my teaching is. If I ask students, they will never share. [...] If teachers cannot make a good impression on students, most of them will evaluate me as 'Moderate.' The higher the ratio of 'Moderate' and 'Difficult to understand' is, the lower the ratio of 'Easy to understand' will be. If there were around 50-60% of 'Easy to understand,' the School Administration Board would issue a warning (I. 9: 207-213)

These responses demonstrated that teachers considered students' reflections as a reliable source of information for teaching improvement: 'the most accurate assessor is students.' They maintained that there might be reasons behind students' opinions, and in most cases, teachers tried to recognize their limitations to improve teaching practice as well as student-teacher relationships. Students' satisfaction has been a strong underlying motivation for teachers to 'make continuous efforts and do the best' and 'always be a perfect role model to students' because they were aware that students are assessors who make judgment 'anywhere and anytime.'

Third, although teachers did not directly oppose student questionnaires as an indicator of teacher appraisal, many teachers pointed out their limitations and doubted their results:

Concerning student questionnaires, there are many problems. It is greatly subjective ... It is just a source of information to adjust myself. It shows what should be adjusted in each class. It's just one source of information, but not particularly exact (I. 19: 263-267)

The result is just relative. Sometimes when the student-teacher relationship is not harmonious, the result would be low. However, it does not prove anything about teaching performance. In many cases, it reflects the psychological aspect, and it is relative. It is just a source of reference (I. 1: 173-177)

Students' reflection is subjective rather than rationale. They can only assess whether teachers make students feel excited or not rather than assessing teachers' knowledge. They are not able to assess our qualifications. The main objective is to investigate whether teachers make them feel excited and how teachers interact with students (I. 14: 156-161)

I think it is just one source of information for teachers to know and adjust teaching practice. Being a psychological test, if they [students] are in a good mood, the response might be positive. If a teacher has just punished them, the response would be very different (I. 23: 337-340).

For these teachers, questionnaire results contained 'a lot of problems', are 'relative' and are 'not properly exact' because it depends on students' emotions such as 'if they are in a good mood, the response might be positive' and 'sometimes when the student-teacher relationship is not good, the result would be low'. It only reflected the student-teacher relationship rather than teachers' efforts or qualifications, especially when

students 'are not able to assess our [teachers'] qualifications.' Therefore, these teachers considered the questionnaire result to be only a minor source of reference to understand students' perceptions and make a self-adjustment. These two examples further illustrated the limitation of this method:

I do not understand why. In the first semester, some students had rated my teaching as 'Difficult to understand.' I thought that there might be some reasons for that. Then, I changed in the second semester and made the lesson more attractive. However, the results were unchanged. Then I realized that sometimes my teaching did not cause it, but it's merely that they hate me. For example, Class A4, as they like me, so no matter how I teach, they will give a positive response. ... Thus, I think it cannot fully reflect all my efforts. If you are excellent, but strict with them or give them a low mark, they would make a negative response. It does not reflect reality (I. 6: 318-327).

There might be students who do not like me; but I am sure that the number is just a few. For me, I just need around 70% good responses from students. The rest might be students who do not like me. However, I do not think this result is a big problem because a significant share rated me well. Thus, I think it is precise (I. 13: 174-179).

It could be seen that these two young teachers maintained contrasting perspectives to the preciseness of questionnaire results: 'it cannot fully reflect all my efforts' and 'it is precise.' However, both teachers shared a viewpoint that no matter how hard they tried, 'there might be students who do not like me' and 'it was not caused by my teaching, but merely that they hated me.' It seems to be impossible to make all of the students love all of the teachers and be interested in all of the lessons. Therefore, they did not rely much on questionnaire results but tended to accept a relative result. In other words, the student

questionnaire results were limited since they presented the subjective opinions of students and did not precisely reflect teachers' efforts and performance.

Consequently, there are two streams of perspective towards the effects of student questionnaires on the student-teacher relationship. On the one hand, young teachers tended to easily compromise with regard to students' mistakes to gain their favor and to maintain a harmonious relationship. One young teacher admitted:

In my school, it seems that the school grants excessive rights to students.

Sometimes when students make mistakes, teachers are likely to hesitate to punish students because it might reduce the favor of students as well as feedback result (I. 13: 180-182).

This situation was mentioned in a school meeting:

When students of other classes are using lipstick, please do not ignore it and allow them to use lipstick because 'they might hate me,' 'they might rate me low on the questionnaire' (O. 4: 939-941).

In this school meeting, teachers discussed measures to restrict students from using make-up when going to school¹⁷. There was the concern that if teachers apply strict punishments, students would hate them and respond negatively on the questionnaire. Both interview and observation data showed that the questionnaire result could affect the behaviors of young teachers toward students. Teachers were challenged to strictly enforce school regulations on the one hand and maintain good relationships with students on the other hand.

In contrast, for senior teachers, questionnaire results seem not to have much effect:

¹⁷. In most public schools in Vietnam, girl students are not encouraged or even forbidden to make up when going to school.

For me, I do not care much about the questionnaire results. I just think about how to make good things for students and after their graduation, how they feel about their teacher ... I do not care how they judged me. Therefore, whenever I teach them, I always require them to learn seriously until the last minute, learning is learning, playing is playing. In my session, if students are neglectful of learning, I require them to stand up or get out of the class. I am quite authoritative. However, the questionnaire result is very positive (I. 23: 340-348).

There might be several interpretations surrounding this case. One might argue that the senior teacher was too rigid when applying strict punishment rules. She also did not care much about how students judged her and maintained her teaching style. It is possible that 'the questionnaire result is very positive' because students were scared of the teacher and afraid of stricter management from her. However, this assumption seems to be unreasonable because if the teacher misbehaved, students could immediately report it to their parents or school leaders, and the teacher would be monitored and punished. Another explanation might be the teacher had considerable experience in student management, and she was confident about being able to choose effective strategies for managing them. When giving the example 'if students are neglectful of learning, I require them to stand up or get out of the class,' she just wanted to highlight that she will not ease punishment rules just to satisfy students. This assumption was further proved via the remaining part of her interview.

In short, it could be concluded that students' reflections via questionnaire contributed to increasing the comprehensiveness of teacher appraisal results by reflecting the view of students to teachers' teaching. Although the preciseness of questionnaire results remained a controversial matter, it was recognized as a valuable source of reference for teachers to improve teaching practice and better respond to the needs of

students. Delivering questionnaires was also a practical method to grant students more rights to involve them in decisions relating to their learning.

Peer-review.

In Green School, peer-review was considered one key factor of the teacher appraisal system. Two forms of peer-review are teaching observation and final review of professional groups.

There are regular observation and ad-hoc observations. After every observation, every teacher makes an assessment and then we have a meeting of teacher members to extract what was learned (I. 13: 165-167)

I think peer-review is accurate. They observed my teaching, they pointed out my strengths and weaknesses, and they judged whether a lesson was successful or unsuccessful. I think it is accurate (I. 19: 268-271).

These responses showed that teaching observation was not only a form of teacher appraisal but also a favorable opportunity to learn among colleagues. Teachers in the professional group contributed their ideas relating to the lesson, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the observed teacher. In addition, at the end of the semester, subject groups organized a review meeting to evaluate teachers:

After every semester, we submit a self-evaluation report. Then the lead teacher makes a final evaluation of every member teacher (I. 13: 167-169)

We evaluate other contributions to teacher groups such as teaching initiatives, task fulfillment (I. 5: 149-150)

This year, homeroom teachers can vote for the best subject teachers in his or her class and vice versa. Then some best teachers are most trusted and favored by others (I. 9: 119-122)

It could be seen that the peer-review is designed comprehensively, including a formative assessment via teaching observation, and a summative assessment by a self-evaluation report and a final evaluation by the lead teacher. Most interviewees agreed that peer-review results precisely reflect their efforts and capacity because teachers in a group had considerable time to observe and interact with each other, and they had sufficient expertise and qualification to evaluate colleagues accurately. Indeed, these forms of peer-review were quite common in most public schools, and research data did not show much difference between peer-review practices in these school contexts. One noticeable difference might be that the lead teachers in Green School had higher autonomy and responsibility to observe member teachers and synthesize many sources of information to generate a final evaluation on teacher performance. Moreover, Green School introduced a new practice that ‘homeroom teachers can vote for the best subject teachers in his or her class and vice versa.’ It seems that more than being an appraisal method, the school aimed to promote interaction and cooperation between homeroom teachers and subject ones with views to improve educational quality.

Only one interviewee held a different view on peer-review:

In one semester, we just voted for one or two best teachers. That is all. There is no real peer-review. I think it is awkward to do peer-review. I cannot evaluate other teachers because I have insufficient information to make conclusions. I do my business, and they do theirs. I cannot evaluate the whole teaching process of others but just one or two teaching sessions. Thus, peer-review is such a difficult task (I. 24: 140-143).

The teacher did not support peer-review because she thought that she ‘cannot evaluate the whole teaching process of others but just one or two teaching sessions’ and she had ‘insufficient information to make conclusions.’ However, her opinion seems to be

unreasonable when teachers in a group had many chances to observe and interact with each other to make an evaluation. In most interviews, there was nearly no complaint about the peer-review mechanism. Indeed, the critical problem of peer-review was not so much a lack of information as a regard for harmonious relations. This problem was only hinted at via a small piece of observation data from a school meeting:

Superintendents should send me more information, please. I kept seeing the same information, ... but you did not report severe violations ... This situation is rooted in the fact that superintendents are hesitant in front of homeroom teachers, homeroom teachers are hesitant in front of students, the homeroom teacher of this class is hesitant in front of those of other classes. Even the subject teacher feels hesitant in front of homeroom teachers when she lowered the performance grade of that class. Some subject teachers reported this problem to me. I said, 'Can you go with me to meet that homeroom teacher? I will completely solve this problem'. She said, 'I cannot. We [this subject teacher and the homeroom teacher] must see each other tomorrow'. Why cannot you see each other just because of a report? ... I have to tell the truth, is there any homeroom teacher here who does not understand your colleagues? Their characteristics, their dedication, their responsibility, their capacity. Do not you know them? Surely not. We know our colleagues thoroughly. And I know you very well ... Thus, you [the homeroom teacher] cannot hide your fault. Why did you complain, 'why did you [the subject teacher] lower performance grade of my class?'. Why did you complain? (O. 4: 903-926).

It is contextualized that the school allowed superintendents and subject teachers to be able to monitor class activities, report students' violations, and judge class performance in some aspects like maintaining student discipline. This class performance

grade was an important indicator to evaluate the efficiency of homeroom teachers. This quotation presented a typical problem of the peer-review mechanism. Generally, subject teachers tended to hesitate and ignore student problems to avoid possible tensions and maintain a good relationship with homeroom teachers. In this case, when a subject teacher reported a student's violation and lower class performance grade, the homeroom teacher, who is responsible for managing the class, complained to the former 'Why did you [the subject teacher] minor performance grade of my class?' because it might decrease her performance result. Although the subject teacher had no fault, she did not want to thoroughly deal with this problem because any further reactions to the older colleague might be judged as dishonor and increased tension. Maybe next time, the subject teacher would be more hesitant to report problems. The sentence 'we must see each other tomorrow' accurately reflected a Vietnamese traditional culture that emphasizes personal face, maintaining harmony, and avoiding criticism and conflict as much as possible. This data might hint that peer-review might be not very precise because it is primarily affected by cultural factors.

In short, when the performance-based pay system led to a stronger decentralization into subject groups and lead teachers, peer-review accounted for a significant part of the teacher appraisal system. It has created a mutual observation and evaluation among teachers in one professional group. It was not only an indicator of the appraisal system but also an essential source for teachers to communicate, endeavor, and learn from each other. However, the preciseness of peer-review results was a matter of concern when considering that Vietnamese people tend to avoid criticism and conflict.

The evaluation of the School Administration Board.

The final component of the teacher appraisal system was the evaluation of the school principal. Generally, from synthesizing the three above-mentioned sources, the

lead teacher drew up a report on the performance of member teachers. Then the lead teacher and the principal discussed each case, and the principal made a final decision. In most cases, when her observation fit with official indicators, she agreed with the report and appraisal result. Teachers reflected on the evaluation of the school principal:

The evaluation of the school principal is especially precise. Her observations of teachers are exact and comprehensive (I. 1: 170-173).

She observed me in many aspects, such as fulfilling the tasks of professional teacher groups, students' feedback, my relationship with colleagues, and colleagues' feedback. Sometimes she observes me; sometimes, she listens from those who worked with me. For example, my teaching performance was good; I made exciting teaching initiatives; I participated in a musical performance (I. 6: 296-303).

And the principal admitted:

When deciding the salary for homeroom teachers, I did not rely much on students' questionnaire results. I did not rely much on it. As I said, if you understand your colleagues, so do I. No one can hide what he or she did. Every day, every week, I got many calls from parents because they are very moved and fired up by your work with students ... It is 'good wine needs no bush.' (O. 4: 941-948).

It could be added that the principal did not conduct any official evaluation such as an observation checklist or a monitoring system. Her information mainly comes from her observations of teachers and inquiring from colleagues and parents. She takes into consideration not only official evaluation indicators like performance results, students' feedback but also factors like 'relationship and communication with colleagues' and 'colleague's feedback.' This practice might reflect her leadership perspective that teachers in a school should be good at not only teaching and professional tasks but also at

maintaining positive relationships with colleagues. Contextually, this perspective could derive from one typical feature of Vietnamese organizational culture that emphasizes community and harmonious relationships with others. Also, as the principal expected to promote teacher groups' value and an active school community, she might turn more attention to these factors. On the one hand, the evaluation of the principal might be a cause for concern. If the judgment were based on only personal observations and inquiries, it could be subjective and inaccurate. A large number of teachers could be another barrier when the principal was not able to observe and evaluate all her staff precisely. Evaluation criteria such as a good relationship with colleagues or enthusiastic participation in school activities might not entirely reflect a good teacher. Teachers could be under more stress when trying to be perfect teachers in many aspects. On the other hand, it could be argued that once working in Green School, teachers must accept these pressures, and these criteria could be a clear motive for them to improve themselves in all situations. More importantly, the synthesis of three key indicators (students' test results, students' feedback, and peer-review) accounts for a significant part in the final result. As these indicators were very detailed, comprehensive, and accurate, the observation of the school principal was only a basis for reaffirming that result.

In most cases, the school principal agreed with the appraisal result, but sometimes, her observation might be different from one of the critical indicators. One teacher shared her story:

At that time, my reflection result was lowest among teachers. However, I still had great trust from the School Administration Board when they assigned me to be the homeroom teacher of the worst class in the school. It was four years ago. And I was the homeroom teacher of that class until they graduated from school. There was great sharing and support. If they [school leaders] were concerned with

students' reflections only, they might take careful consideration or observe the teachers' progress over several years. But they assigned work to me. I think it means recognition of school leaders (I. 2: 154-162).

In this case, the interviewee had been a good teacher in another public school, and she was a new arrival at Green School. In her first year of working in Green School, due to unfamiliarity with school culture and students, she received negative reflections from students. However, the principal understood that students' feedback might not be able to reflect the teachers' capacity fully. She trusted the teacher and gave her another chance. The teacher was challenged to be the homeroom teacher of the worst class in the school. This assignment seemed to be a big challenge to the teacher because she was inexperienced in the school context and might be not able to deal with complicated student-teacher relationships in the new class. The teacher recognized this was both a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate her capacity, and finally, she was successful in both teaching and developing a strong relationship with students. It could be seen that the principal had a strong trust in the teachers' capacity and potentials. A similar practice was also found in another case of a young teacher:

She [school principal] did not like me at first because I slowly integrated with work. She commented that I was slow. But I am the one who was very enthusiastic and responsible for working. These characters could not be seen if I was not at work. Gradually, from the second semester, I was assigned more tasks, I gained improved results. She started holding another view of me. She met me and invited me to work at Green School (I. 6: 283-290)

She [school principal] recognizes the teachers' efforts. For young teachers, she looks at their competencies. It means those who have competencies would be appointed to a relevant post. Close relation does not make sense (I. 6: 364-366).

The teacher told her story when she was an intern. Although the principal was afraid that the teacher might be inactive and unenthusiastic, she realized the potential of the teacher. Therefore, she gave the teacher more chances by assigning her more work. The school principal carefully observed not only the teachers' competencies but also her efforts. Moreover, in this quotation, the teacher mentioned a widespread practice in public schools that teachers who have good relationships with school principals are likely to get preference in working and evaluating. However, in Green School, 'close relation does not make sense.' This response might imply that the evaluation of the principal is objective and precise.

These two cases proved that although the appraisal system was an essential basis of teacher evaluation, the principal considered various aspects like teacher competencies, effort, good relationships with colleagues, and participation in school activities. When teachers got low performance, in most cases, the principal tended to trust in teachers and always gave them another chance to demonstrate their capacity. Even when her observation of one teacher showed a negative result, she gave them more time and chances. Apparently, she can only trust and empathize with teachers to a certain extent, illustrated by those who were dismissed due to underperformance. Nevertheless, the critical point was that she always made deliberate observation and trusted in the ethical aspects of teachers. This feature might be attributed to one feature of Vietnamese people that emphasizes more affective factors than the rational ones.

These two cases shared a common point that the teachers showed weak performance, but the principal carefully evaluated the situation and gave them another chance. However, no data illustrated how the principal reacted when teachers showed excellent performance in the appraisal system but earned a negative evaluation from the principal. Because when the principal played a decisive role in making a teacher

evaluation, there might be one potential consequence that the principal relied on her subjective judgment and made unfavorable decisions regarding teachers. Nevertheless, this situation could rarely occur because when the appraisal system is somewhat accurate, and if the principal made irrational decisions that were harmful to teachers, her reputation might be diminished.

Appraisal results.

Teachers expressed different perspectives on appraisal results. Most teachers reported that the appraisal system reflected their work comprehensively and accurately (I. 13: 171-172; I. 14: 153). They explained:

I think each form of appraisal system has its pros and cons; thus, the combination of forms creates a more precise result. It should be the combination of three sources because students' reflections seem to be too subjective; peer-review is too rational. Good knowledge does not always mean good teaching (I. 14: 163-166)

It [teachers' appraisal results] depends on particular cases. If students' feedbacks match with peer-review, weak teachers might be fired. If students' feedback is negative, whereas peer-review is proper, teachers might have the opportunity to show their capacity (I. 6: 329-333).

These responses showed that the appraisal system took many aspects of teacher performance into consideration including students' test results, students' reflection on teaching performance and student-teacher relationships, peer-review regarding professional capacity and colleague relationships, and the School Administration Board's evaluation on remaining aspects. Teachers recognized that although each form of appraisal systems had its strengths and weaknesses, the combination of these sources generated comprehensive and precise results. More importantly, when making personnel decisions, the school does not rely on one source of information but considers many

sources. This appraisal system was mostly different from that of public schools where teachers were evaluated according to national regulations (MoET, 2018a) and schools had no authority to add their tailor-made criteria. Moreover, teacher appraisal in public schools is done once a year or once every two years. According to research data, all forms of teacher appraisal in Green School were conducted every semester, and most forms were based on regular observations and evaluations. This practice might be more advantageous when the school can frequently track teacher performance status and timely remunerate employees. For teachers, they can review their work, receive student feedback from the last semester, and make necessary improvements for the next one. Another strength of the appraisal system was a focus on final appraisal indicators while leaving considerable space for the teachers to perform their work ‘The most important indicator is work performance. ... No matter what you did, your work efficiency and performance must be high’ (I. 3: 357-358). This quotation might hint that in the context of performance-based pay, teachers can enjoy greater autonomy in their work as long as they can deliver a convincing performance.

However, other teachers maintained another view of the appraisal results:

It is relatively precise. To be evaluated, everything requires a long time and frequent observation. But it has not been precise yet (I. 1: 225-226).

It has been not precise 100% yet but an essential source of reference (I. 20: 14-15).

Teacher appraisal is never accurate for all cases. It is just a relative result. The most important thing is not what the appraisal result is but if are you satisfied with the result (I. 18: 318-320).

It is complicated to confirm whether the system is trustworthy. If I say ‘yes,’ it means ‘the system is perfect.’ However, the school is improving it. If I say ‘not

yet,' it means 'there might be better ways.' But I have not found any solutions.

Anyway, the school is doing its best. Shortcomings would be gradually improved (I. 7: 108-114).

These teachers seemed not to trust in the preciseness of appraisal result when 'it is relatively precise,' 'it has not been precise yet,' or it is 'never accurate for all cases.' One explanation is that the appraisal system and performance-based pay have just been introduced in recent years (I. 6: 381-382), and they needed time to be improved. Moreover, most public schools had no experience in developing a teacher appraisal system since they just applied nationally determined indicators. As teachers cannot propose any improvement for the system, they tend to accept its results. Most importantly, teachers felt satisfied with this relative result, and no one expressed an expectation to go back to the national appraisal system.

In short, school autonomy in personnel and finance allowed the school to develop its unique teacher appraisal system that covers various aspects of teachers' work. Although the precision of the system was a matter of concern, it could more comprehensively reflect the work of teachers and be a good motive for teachers to improve their performance continuously.

Performance-Based Pay

'If you did a good job, you will get a good salary.'

Firstly, teachers reported that their appraisal result has a close link to their remuneration and their salary is well-deserved. They explained how the school links appraisal results to remuneration:

It is presented via how you will be assigned tasks in the next semester. Teachers and their colleagues were able to realize it. For example, if you performed well in teaching, you will be assigned to this class, or you will be assigned more tasks, or

your salary will be increased. It is a hidden message of the school principal that gives strong recognition to your performance (I. 24: 163-168).

In a school meeting, the principal reminded lead teachers:

It is the beginning of the second semester now. You [lead teachers] should pay attention to arrange teachers' work for the next school year based on their teaching performance as well as their students' results. This policy is evident in our school. Teachers are arranged workload based on their competencies (O. 3: 74-78).

It could be clarified that if teachers' performance was excellent in the last semester, they would be assigned to teach important classes or assigned more tasks. As teacher salary was paid according to their real work, it meant the more tasks teachers were assigned, the higher the salary they would get. For example, if a physics teacher had an outstanding performance, he or she would be assigned to teach Class A¹⁸, this assignment was a hidden message that the teachers' competencies was deserving of teaching important classes. As the number of physics sessions in these classes was higher than that in other classes, the teacher can teach more and get a higher salary. Or if the school cannot instantly arrange the teacher to important classes, he or she will be given increased teaching tasks in other classes or an increased bonus. In contrast, if the physics teacher performed poorly, he or she would be assigned to teach Class D¹⁹ with fewer tasks and lower salary accordingly. Although the school did not officially issue the final appraisal results publicly, teachers can understand a 'hidden message' via their workload and salary in the following semester. In all interviews, teachers reported that their remuneration was appropriate and in accordance with their efforts and contribution:

¹⁸ Classes with students who will take Block A (mathematics, physics, chemistry) in the national university entrance examination. Because physics plays an essential role in these classes

¹⁹ Classes with students who will take Block D (mathematics, literature, English) in the national university entrance examination; therefore, physics plays a minor role in these classes

Working in this school is apparent. If you did a good job, you would get a good salary. The school issued a school cost norm, which is very transparent and clear (I. 23: 413-415).

From school principal to teachers, all of us have to work well to get salaries (I. 20: 178).

According to this response, remuneration policy was clearly stated in school cost norms, which were applied to all school members with no exception ‘from the school principal to teachers.’ Teachers firmly believed that remuneration was fair and all their efforts would be paid well deservedly, ‘if you did a good job, you would get a good salary.’ One teacher expressed his view on this situation:

Because this is a self-financed school, our salary is not fixed to a level. In this school, excellent teachers get a higher salary, regular teachers get a lower salary, but all of us enjoy a higher salary than the general level. There are variations to stimulate teachers to earn a higher salary. Salary and bonuses are quite good and create momentum for teachers to make continuous efforts (I. 5: 157-161)

It could be explained that in the tenure-based pay in public schools, teachers at the same tenure track enjoyed the same salary. This mechanism was further resisted by the norm of equality in the public context where people preferred everybody being equal rather than fair treatment. In contrast, the performance-based pay system in Green School emphasized differentiating employees according to their capacity and contributions. This interview data proved that although performance-based pay has been implemented in Green School in recent years, it gained considerable support from teachers. For Interviewee #5, although his salary might be higher or lower than that of other colleagues, he agreed with a rule that ‘excellent teachers get a higher salary; normal teachers get a

lower salary.’ These variations between teachers were a strong motivation for him to make continuous efforts and earn a higher salary.

Secondly, young teachers strongly supported performance-based pay because this was an ideal opportunity to express their capacity and get a higher salary. A junior teacher gave this example of when he had recently moved to Green School:

School autonomy is very interesting. In public schools, the salary track is fixed, and you have to follow that track. For instance, a junior teacher will be paid at the 2.34 level, and then it takes many years to get a salary increase. In my case, the salary increased faster than I expected. In the first semester, my salary was quite low. After only one semester, it gradually increased, and after one academic year, as my performance was outstanding, I was assigned to teach more than ten sessions. And then more than twenty-five sessions because the School Administration Board trusted in my capacity. The more I teach, the higher the salary I get. This mechanism is similar to that in foreign countries. I am very excited about it (I. 9: 158-166).

In regular public schools, teachers’ salary was paid according to a fixed tenure track and automatically increased every three years. Whether teachers’ performance was good or not, their salary was fixed and equal to others at the same tenure track. In this case, for instance, if it were a regular public school, the interviewee could be paid very low at the 2.34 level, which was a salary track for teachers who are at the early stage of a teaching career in public schools. This salary level was equivalent to about 120 US Dollars per month, which is a meager income in the context of a big city. In spite of being excellent, he must wait for at least two or three years to reach the next track, which was not much higher than the current salary, about 150 US Dollars. Talented teachers might be demotivated if their salary is too low. In contrast, thanks to school autonomy in

finance, Green School was able to offer a generous salary to the young teacher when he had proved his excellent performance. It could be suggested that the performance-based pay policy played a significant role in stimulating teachers' work motivation and attracting talent.

Another young teacher pointed out the benefit of performance-based pay to her:

In my school, the salary is based on teaching performance. If I perform well, I am able to be more confident with colleagues. They also respect me more. I think it is very fair (I. 13: 186-187).

Generally, as regular public schools remunerated teachers according to their years of working experience and maintained a tenure-based hierarchical structure, senior teachers were most respected and had a powerful voice in professional matters. Thus, young teachers had fewer chances to demonstrate their capacity. In performance-based pay, as the most critical indicator was performance output, young teachers can prove their capacity and gain respect from colleagues. Therefore, they can be more confident when working with older colleagues. This data also hinted that performance-based pay created a fair working environment where all teachers, especially the young teachers, were encouraged to contribute as much as possible and are remunerated correspondingly. It also promoted a school value of emphasizing real capacity and effort rather than seniority or authority.

Thirdly, performance-based pay had a positive influence on teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction. One teacher offered this comparison:

The most typical feature of Green School is a working environment that facilitates the expression of employees' capacity and creativity. The management mechanism is quite flexible, output-based, or performance-based management. Remuneration is also based on your competencies and work performance. These

features make Green School distinguished from others. I had taught in another public school for more than ten years and visited many public schools, but I realized the management mechanism in this school greatly stimulates teachers (I. 20: 6-11).

It could be inferred that performance-based pay was a unique feature of a self-financed school, which greatly contrasted with the tenure-based pay mechanism in other regular public schools. In this quotation, the teacher compared her prior experience when working in public schools and recognized that performance-based pay ‘facilitates the expression of employees’ capacity and creativity.’ This mechanism ‘greatly stimulates teachers’ because teachers were evaluated and remunerated according to their competencies and work performance. Moreover, no fixed salary track meant that there was no limit for teachers to make continuous effort, attain better performance, and reach higher individual goals. For example, in most public schools, one teacher can be the homeroom teacher of one class only due to barriers in school finance and personnel regulations. In Green School, it is prevalent that if homeroom teachers can manage one class well, they could be assigned to manage two classes to get a higher salary (I. 4: 73-76).

Performance-based pay might be beneficial in terms of increasing teachers’ job satisfaction. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with their salary and benefits, for example ‘with the current salary in my school, teachers can live comfortably’ (I. 13: 322-323) or ‘for me, I am satisfied with it’ (I. 14: 169). Besides a competitive salary, teachers in Green School also get health care insurance and other social benefits like those in public schools such as sick leave, personal days, and health care services (I. 3: 256-258). Interviewee 4: 109-111 reported that these bonus policies are very reasonable and timely.

A young teacher further reported the benefits of performance-based pay:

Since her principalship, the salary has been increased a lot. It has changed.

Teachers in civil education or physical education can live well with their job. The salary increase presents the recognition of the school ... I do not give mathematics, English, or literature teachers as examples because they are too rich; they have a lot of chances to earn money. But civil education teachers now can live well with their job. They can be assigned homeroom teachers or other tasks. I think this is a positive change which will make teachers more believe in it (I. 6: 385-394).

I saw many changes. The benefit for employees is remarkable. The school takes well care of teachers' lives. I think it is a motivation for teachers to develop further (I. 6: 639-640).

In another interview, one Civil Education teacher admitted:

When I teach well, I can have enough income thanks to this job. For me, I am pleased when I can live comfortably thanks to teaching Civil Education (I. 23: 163-164).

This data mainly reflected an improvement for teachers who work in 'minor subjects' such as civil education, physical education, and teachers at the early stage of their teaching careers. Generally, these teachers get meager salaries in regular public schools because their subjects are considered 'minor subjects' and teachers have less opportunity to increase income by organizing private tutoring classes. In Green School, if these teachers proved their capacity, they can be assigned other tasks to get a higher salary. Interview data reflected that performance-based pay has increased their income as well as motivated them better. It is suggested that school autonomy and performance-based pay have made positive impacts on teachers' salaries, especially for these types of less-favored teachers.

Being a self-financed school, Green School had autonomy over the school budget. Observation data showed that the school gave priority to teacher remuneration, even when school revenue might be reduced:

We have a suggestion that most tuition fees would be used to pay for teachers.

You must know that in one month, the school must cover many other expenditures. One might think that we collect money from students, pay for teachers only, and get huge revenue. Indeed, we have no profit from this activity.

For this extra course, for example, we spend most students' tuition fees to remunerate teachers as high as in private tutor centers. It means that expenditure for operating other departments are not included in this budget. It is a way of rewarding your [teachers'] efforts during the last months. This offer is a bonus for you to invite your family to dine out. Please understand that the school always cares for you (O. 19: 116-128).

In this case, this school manager explained how the school budget was delivered. When students contributed tuition fees for extra courses, the school allocated a high proportion of the school budget to remunerate teachers at a level 'as high as in private tutor centers'. This strategy might increase teachers' school commitment and job satisfaction when their efforts were rewarded by a high bonus. It also showed that the school considers teachers as precious resources that make a significant contribution to school success and reputation.

However, an investigation of interview data showed several underlying problems of a performance-based pay mechanism:

The salary is secured, although it is not too [pause]. For me, I just think ..., or maybe I have a different view from other people. I think with this job, with a pleasant working environment like this, with this salary – for me, I am satisfied.

Others may compare and say that the salary is lower than that in other schools. I think not all people could be satisfied with their salary. It depends on our view of salary (I. 18: 65-70).

There is no fixed salary. I get what I have worked for. Some people might feel insecure. Or it is a little bit risky. It also depends on the evaluation of the School Administration Board. Some people might not be satisfied. For me, I am delighted with that result (I. 9: 168-171).

According to this data, performance-based pay might be disadvantageous when it seemed to be ‘unsecured,’ ‘a little bit risky,’ and ‘depends on the evaluation of the School Administration Board.’ The explanation of the interviewee was quite reasonable when teacher satisfaction did not depend on how much salary they get but on how they viewed salary and work. The salary in Green School might be ‘unsecured’ and ‘risky’ for those who were familiar with tenure-based pay in public schools and preferred a stable job. In fact, it was reported that the average income of teachers in Green School was around fifteen million Vietnam dong (VND) [around 685 US Dollar] per month (I. 29: 76-77), which was much higher than that of their peers in regular public schools (I. 5: 159) and equivalent to private ones (I. 24: 78-79). If teachers expected a higher salary, for example, when working in international schools, they might be dissatisfied with their current salary. Therefore, these quotations could hint that although performance-based pay might have certain limitations, most teachers are still satisfied with it.

In summary, the remuneration system of Green School had a close link to teacher appraisal results: the better the teachers’ performance was, the higher the salary they would get. A fair appraisal mechanism, in combination with a deserved and timely reward system, would increase teachers’ job satisfaction, stimulate their work motivation, and promote a positive school cultural value. However, performance-based pay might be

unsuitable for those who were familiar with a secured salary and a stable job in regular public schools. A note of caution was that although there might be concerns surrounding the appraisal results, the remuneration system got no complaint and all teachers satisfied with their received salary. On the positive side, the school might be fair and deliberate in deciding employee salary. However, another possibility was that as salary is an important and sensitive matter to all teachers, they avoided discussing it too much. In addition, as the principal was the key person who decided their salary, any criticism of salary could be a disadvantage to the principal and the teacher as well.

Performance-based pay as a flexible management tool.

First, as school autonomy allowed Green School to be flexible in paying teachers, the school tended to use performance-based pay as a means to stimulate teachers for gaining expected outcomes and school strategy. In a meeting of homeroom teachers, the principal announced:

I have just discussed with Mr. B [vice-principal]. In this meeting, we proposed that you [teachers] should pay more attention to student scientific research. We proposed that in the teacher appraisal from this year, we could add points for those whose students attended research contests from the school level ... We add higher points for those whose students attended research contests at a higher level. There might be three levels at school, a university level, and a national level. We believe that when you are involved in it, our students would benefit. When you dedicate yourselves to it, our students would be serious-minded and successful (O. 4: 336-345).

This response should be interpreted in context. The principal had realized that student research would be a potential school strategy when Green School had many advantageous conditions in this area, and students were particularly interested in doing

research. To realize this strategy, homeroom teachers and subject teachers played a critical role in attracting, encouraging, and instructing students in the research process. Therefore, the school decided to ‘add points for teachers whose students attended research contests’ as a way to encourage teachers to be involved in this field actively. These added points would contribute to higher final performance results and higher salaries to teachers accordingly. The usage of performance indicators in this situation could create a strong motivation for teachers. This policy also proved that any teacher effort would be recognized and remunerated. Besides, this response might indicate that teacher appraisal, and its indicators are always flexible and adjustable to attain school strategies and priorities. However, this policy might be limited when it might not be applicable to all teachers; for instance, those teaching ‘minor subjects’ like music, physical education.

These ideas are supported in another similar case:

I expect that you [homeroom teachers] have accompanied students for a long time. It’s time to reach the top of the mountain now. You might have to work very hard these days. Thus, from this March, I suggested increasing bonuses for homeroom teachers of Grade 9 and 12 as an encouragement and a thank you for your efforts and support for students (O. 4: 495-500).

This observation was made in March when national examinations were getting close. During this time, homeroom teachers of Grade 9 and 12 strenuously supported their students as they prepared for exams. Thanks to autonomy in allocating the school budget, the principal decided to ‘increase bonus for homeroom teachers.’ Naturally, this action could be seen as a mere financial stimulation to employees. However, the principal considered it as a thank you for their effort and support of students.’ It showed that the

principal sincerely appreciated teachers' contribution to the success of students in particular and the school in general.

The following case presented the use of performance-based pay for a different purpose:

In our school, it is evident that students have not worn helmets when driving electric bikes. In School P., teachers might lose performance points if their students violate the regulation. Our school will also apply this policy. Because it shows the powerlessness of homeroom teachers. If you are powerless in managing students, you might be powerless in other tasks (O. 4: 549-554).

In this case, although it was nationally regulated that students wear helmets when driving electric bikes, many students violated this regulation. Green School adopted the policy of another self-managed school to manage the situation. Besides punishment measures for students, 'teachers might lose performance points if their students violate the regulation.' Because homeroom teachers received higher salaries for their work, they must have increased responsibility in educating and managing students' behavior. When the final performance result was too low, teachers could not be eligible to become homeroom teachers in the coming school year.

Observation data showed other similar situations when the principal uses performance-based pay as a tool to punish employees:

I think that superintendents are working less effectively and I will decrease their salary this month. Why? Why did you [superintendents] not manage the teachers who were allowing students to watch films in the class, and let students sleep in the classroom? If you cannot manage, the school does not need you anymore. What is your duty? It is to manage students, and if you cannot do it, please stop your work immediately (O. 24: 604-609).

Why do we have to keep sending many notifications? There should be only one notification; for example, the deadline is on Wednesday. And on Thursday, we would have a list of those who did not meet the deadline ... I think even the worse teacher might feel ashamed when his or her name was presented on the blacklist. And I'm sure that if they are regularly late, his or her salary or reward would be affected because everybody knows him very well. The school does nothing, and he or she could feel underserved of a high salary (O. 4: 734-740).

In the first quotation, as superintendents worked ineffectively, the principal suggested decreasing their salary in that month and even dismissing them. In the second one, teachers who did not fulfill tasks might be publicly notified, and this notification would lead to a decrease in salary. Although it was quite controversial to judge the advantages and disadvantages of this method²⁰, the point is the principal showed a strong determination to manage teacher performance through an economic incentive. This data also prove the high pressure of teachers working in a self-financed school. The performance-based pay system could remunerate teachers' efforts timely and well-deservedly on the one hand, and it could also seriously treat teachers' weak performance or mistakes on the other hand. In short, it could be suggested that the self-managed school mainly used performance-based pay and economic motives to stimulate teachers' motivation. Performance-based pay was not only a system of appraisal and remuneration but also an indirect tool to promote teachers' motivation. Teachers might understand that their small effort every day would lead to changes in salary accordingly and even affect their job security.

²⁰ Notifying the school community of teacher and students' faults is a prevalent practice in most public schools in Vietnam.

‘You did a good job today.’

Besides setting a performance-based pay that made reward based on working performance, the principal also paid attention to recognizing and encouraging small efforts of teachers. ‘In this school, whatever kind of work you do, you will be recognized and incentivized’ (I. 13: 153-154). Although encouragement could be praise or recognitions, they made teachers feel more happy and motivated. Interview data showed that encouragement was especially essential to junior and senior teachers. It is suggested that those at the first stage of teaching career were not able to gain considerable performance quickly. Therefore, incentives for small efforts or results could create significant momentum for them to try harder and gain better results. Interviewee 19: 290-294 emphasized that incentives were not only for those who were very excellent or gained remarkable results but also for those who had made small efforts.

The non-monetary incentive is generally appropriate. Praised teachers are those who made real contributions. They could not be the most excellent, but they made contributions. Every small contribution is recognized. It is well deserved. I thought that the principal is very interested in teachers.

Interview data presented many other examples illustrating this feature:

Sometimes I simply thought that this task was my duty. I had to do it, and I did not expect any reward. Surprisingly, I was praised and rewarded for that task at the end of the academic year. I do not think it could be. For instance, I led students participating in contests or involved in activities such as English festivals. I just think about my responsibility. If I have free time, I just get involved in and support other teachers. I just do my best. Suddenly two months later, I got a reward. My lead teacher said that ‘this is a reward for your contribution to the activities.’ Sometimes I get a message from the principal ‘you did a good job

today. Other teachers are congratulating you'. In general, in my group and my school, encouragement is always timely (I. 13: 155-163).

After the music performance, she [principal] immediately sent a text message to all of us. It means she is very interested in us (I. 9: 133-135).

When I organize Youth Union activities at my faculty, senior teachers always thought that work is our [young teachers'] responsibilities. It is an obvious thing, and they say nothing. When organizing one activity, we need their support and engagement for us as well as for our students. But they did not even attend the activity. If we gain a fruitful accomplishment, no one recognizes it. If we work hard, no one knows. In contrast, in Green School, we always receive support and encouragement from the School Administration Board. They recognize every small effort of ours. For example, when we prepared for a music performance, she [school principal] said thank you to us so much and encouraged us that, 'sometimes we [teachers] should sing for our students.' Just a small response made me feel that she was keenly interested in our work. It was not like 'that work is your responsibility. You must do it'. Thus, I felt so happy and was motivated to contribute more. If you ask young teachers for their expectations, they might say the same as me (I. 6: 367-381).

These responses showed that young teachers were recognized and rewarded for every small task, even when they thought the task was a matter of course or their responsibility. They felt happy and motivated when the school principal recognized and appreciated their effort. The timely recognition and encouragement strengthened teachers' belief that their small tasks were also significant contributions to the school's success, and they were also an essential part of the school. In other words, although the school

maintained a performance-based pay system, the non-monetary incentives made a positive influence on teachers' job satisfaction and motivation.

For senior teachers, who might have better financial status and not cared much about monetary rewards, non-monetary encouragement becomes essential. Interviewee 11: 127-138

One key point is the school motivates all teachers. That's the key. For example, once when I had just finished something, the school principal visited the teacher lounge and shook my hand 'I have just heard that you made a test sample'... That was timely and appropriate encouragement. She just gets the news and then meets me instantly. I think that encouragement is meaningful. I am not the only one, but others do as well. It makes us happy. We realize that the school knows everything we do.

It could be seen that recognition and reward of principal benefited senior teachers when they felt 'comfortable and happy' (I. 24: 80). Thanks to workplace rewards and incentives, teachers could enjoy a positive and productive work environment. Their job satisfaction would be increased when the need of being recognized was fully met, and the relationship between teachers and leaders became closer and more positive. As having a strong faith that every effort would be fully recognized and rewarded, teachers might be motivated to work more efficiently and improve their work practice (I. 7: 122-125; I. 21: 7-10; I. 22: 162-165). 'I just think it is an ideal school to work at when my contributions are recognized' (I. 6: 366-367).

In brief, if school autonomy in finance was a necessary condition for operating a performance-based pay and monetary reward system of a school, non-monetary recognition and reward depended mostly on the school principal. Timely recognition and encouragement might generate a strong motivation for teachers rather than any financial

reward. It required the principal to have a flair for collecting information on teachers' work and make rapid and encouraging responses. This data also proved that although performance-based pay plays a crucial role in personnel management in Green School, other forms of stimulation and recognition are also vital in maintaining teachers' motivation and job satisfaction.

Theme 3. Teachers

The following theme introduces results regarding various aspects of teachers' work in the context of school autonomy. Two properties that emerged from interview and observation data are teacher work motivation and professional groups.

Teacher Work Motivations

‘This is not only a job nor only a teaching career but also our livelihood.’

According to research data, the most important motivation for teachers in Green School was to have a livelihood and job security. Teachers recognized that the management mechanism in Green School, which was mostly different from teacher appraisal and remuneration practices in regular public schools, significantly influenced teachers' perceptions and motivation. They made comparisons:

In other secondary schools, all teachers hold tenured positions and are recruited by the DoET. These teachers might work very well at first, but when they are officially recruited, they tend to work in a way that corresponds to their received remuneration. Thus, there is very low work effectiveness and high resistance. In contrast, in the context of a self-financed public school, teachers have to know very well that this is not only a job nor only a teaching career but also our livelihood. Therefore, we must work more actively and effectively. I think it is a benefit of this model [school autonomy] (I. 3: 231-242).

This response highlighted a radical difference between the working environment in regular public schools and a self-financed school. In public schools, once teachers are officially recruited, their work position will be secured for life. Even when their performance was low, schools could not easily dismiss them because this function is the authority of higher governing bodies like the DoHA or BoHA. Besides, as public schools had no autonomy (or budget) to decide teacher salary, teachers were discouraged that all employees would receive a fixed salary no matter how much they tried or contributed. In other words, teachers in regular public schools were not motivated by financial incentives or job security. These practices created ‘a big resistance’ to teachers and led to ‘low work effectiveness.’ In contrast, in a self-financed school with a performance-based pay system, teachers had a strong work motivation because their income and work security depended on their daily performance. ‘This is not only a job nor only a teaching career but also our livelihood.’ Another teacher further emphasized the impact of performance-based pay on her work motivation:

A regular public school has different goals, different indicators, and different mechanisms. This school is a self-financed school which has a flexible mechanism, and if it is flexible, employees must work accordingly. Because this is a kind of business, it must produce good products to maintain its ... [pause]. But in public schools, they can work cursorily. (I. 19: 183-187).

It could be seen that the work environment has influenced teachers’ work motivation. Because Green School is a self-financed school which is ‘a kind of business,’ teachers cannot work ‘cursorily’ like their peers in regular public schools, but they must try their best to respond to the strict requirements of the school. More importantly, teachers do not only work for their short-term benefits but also for long-term goals. One teacher explained:

I observed a positive influence. If it is public school, teacher salary is covered by the state budget. Full-time officers, for example, these is not words against them, but in fact, they just go to the office on time, then they might go somewhere, no one cares. And they get their salary every month. In this school, you have to work hard with no other choices. If you work hard, the school will pay for you. If you work hard, parents will trust in the quality of the school and send their children to the school. That is the source of school finance. Thus, everybody has to do their best to have a livelihood. If you work hard, you will stay. Otherwise, you have to leave the school. If you were not able to teach Grade 10, the school would assign you to teach Grade 6. If you were not able to teach Grade 6, you might be sacked (I. 4: 139-145).

This response illustrated a close relationship between teachers' efforts in work, the success of the school, and their livelihood and job security. Teachers 'have to work hard with no other choices' for two main reasons. For the short-term, if their performance was too weak, they would immediately get a lower salary or have to leave the school. For the long-term, if they did not work well, the school would lose its reputation for quality or not be able to recruit students, and finally, their job security would be undermined. It could be suggested that in a self-financed school, teachers thoroughly understand the close relationship between school success and their work. Therefore, teachers were strongly motivated to work for both short-term and long-term livelihood and job security. This feature might also hint at a high organizational commitment between the employee and the school.

Working for self-development.

Although extrinsic motivations like salary and job security were essential for teachers in Green School, interview data showed that teachers especially emphasized

intrinsic motivations like self-development. To highlight this feature, most teachers compared themselves to their colleagues in regular public schools:

Public schools are similar to a central-planning mechanism. Plans are imposed from the top, and teachers must implement them. This mechanism is very rigid and does not motivate employees (I. 18: 117-121).

Most public-school teachers think that getting a tenure position is the final goal of the teaching career, and they're job is set for life. They teach what they had and do what they are required. They rarely put in effort to innovate in teaching and learning. Sometimes when there are class observations or teaching contests, they ask me to send my lesson plans. They rarely propose new ideas. They think it is finished when they get an official position. They just teach day by day and do their right business [what's required], and they have no intrinsic motivation (I. 6: 567-572).

There are some differences. If I got a tenured position in a public school, my work could be reduced, and I could work according to the lead of the School Administration Board. But at my school, I have to be innovative to make things better. I visited many public schools and observed those things. They work according to the lead of managers. In this school, I have to propose new tasks to do. If there is nothing to do, I would feel I was lagging (I. 10: 123-128).

My character is I am not satisfied with the present but try to attain a higher performance. My colleagues in public schools are likely to accept the present and resist changes. This perception is inappropriate with the working environment here where teachers must always innovate (I. 22: 186-188).

The current personnel management and tenure-based pay mechanism in regular public schools generated a teachers' perception that 'getting a tenured position is the final

goal of a teaching career and their job is set for life.’ The interviewee described public school teachers as those who just work passively and ‘are likely to accept the present and resist changes.’ They ‘teach what they had and do what they are required,’ ‘rarely put in effort to innovate in teaching and learning.’ In contrast, teachers in Green School had an urgent need of being always innovative and trying new things. They ‘are not satisfied with the present’ and ‘propose new tasks to do’ with a view of ‘attaining higher performance’ and ‘making things better.’ ‘If there is nothing to do, I would feel I was lagging.’ This sentence means that the interviewee has a great motivation to investigate new things to improve herself. Their underlying motivation is not to get a higher salary or better prestige but to challenge and develop their capacity.

Other interview data added that even when teachers must work harder, they felt motivated because they enjoyed having autonomy and having a chance to develop themselves:

I do not think the work is strenuous because when I get more autonomy, I can have free space to organize the teaching and learning process as I wish. It would be very dull if the whole teaching life was about obeying other’s directions. In spite of working harder, this [school-based curriculum] is a fantastic opportunity for teachers to do what we want to and to be recognized (I. 20: 118-121).

I think teachers would work harder. But if they can do what they like and make innovations, it would be less hard than to keep working in a boring mold (I. 5: 96-98).

As teachers in Green School enjoyed greater autonomy in professional tasks, they can have more space to ‘do what they like and make innovations.’ Although their workload might be increased, the exploration of new ideas and the development of their capacity gave them a lot of motivation. Generally, working to challenge or develop

professional capacity was less prevalent as a work motivation in regular public schools. These responses might indicate that teacher autonomy could be a favorable condition to promote teachers' intrinsic motivation in the context of school autonomy. Also, this motivation might relate to the value of a learning organization where every school member was encouraged to learn and develop professional competencies. Another explanation might be that at first, the school required teachers always to be innovative, and then innovation turned out to be an intrinsic motivation of teachers.

Working for self-respect.

Another form of teacher motivation that emerged from the interview data was working for self-respect. Teachers admitted:

A feature I observed is that teachers have a high workload. They work strenuously. It might be due to the school's requirement, or we must prove ourselves in our position. Secondly, it could be because of our self-respect (I. 14: 221-223).

I think everyone must create pressure for themselves to develop and be mature. Teaching is the same for all, but if I would like to teach better and create more prestige, I must try more. There are pressures everywhere. Importantly, the pressure is not a negative thing but a positive motivation (I. 19: 296-300).

For these teachers, important work motivations are 'to prove ourselves in our position,' 'self-respect,' 'to teach better and create more prestige,' 'to develop and be mature.' On the one hand, their motivations might be derived from the demanding requirements of a self-financed school. These teachers did not consider pressure as 'a negative thing but a positive motivation.' On the other hand, they 'create pressure for themselves' to keep themselves always working. It could be interpreted that working 'to prove ourselves in our position' or 'to create more prestige' were primary motivations in

the context of Vietnamese culture which strongly emphasizes demonstrating and maintaining personal prestige in organizations and the public. Moreover, when working with excellent colleagues in a competitive environment, teachers were further motivated to distinguish themselves from others.

One common feature of those who work for self-respect was that they did not care much about job security or remuneration, but they would do their best in all cases. For example:

I just do my work but do not think about any reward. In this Green School, if there are tasks, many teachers just do it ... For me, I did not ask for any reward because if I did not gain this benefit, I might get other things, other values. Many teachers voluntarily teach students. They did not get a bonus, but they are recognized for their contributions by parents, students, and the schools (I. 1: 226-235)

It could be seen that the teacher and his colleagues were willing to work without any expectation to be rewarded. Their most important motivation was work efficiency and the recognition of others. In a similar vein, job security seemed not too important to them:

Frankly, I do not care about tenure positions. It's just a label. What is a tenured position for? For securing the circumstance through which I would never be fired? Social benefits in this school are the same as those in public ones. I believe that when I work hard and attain excellent performance in this school, there is no reason for giving me the sack (I. 13: 306-311).

No problem. Contract or tenure has no meaning to me. I don't care about that. The critical thing is whether you can perform the job. Even when working in public schools, if you are not able to work well, you will be scorned. ... When I do my best, contract, or tenure has no meaning (I. 16: 93-98).

For these teachers, no matter where they were working, they would try their best. They ‘do not care whether the school enjoys autonomy’ and consider tenured positions ‘just a label’ and ‘no meaning.’ They wanted the money they earned to be well deserved according to their capacity and contribution. This idea was supported by other teachers who always ‘try their best to be well deserving of receiving a salary’ (I. 7: 157-159; I. 9: 176-177). In other words, teachers had a strong intrinsic motivation to do their best. This data could also hint that they were confident in their capacity and had a high self-respect. Additionally, they believed that the current performance-based pay was fair: ‘when I work hard and attain good performance..., there is no reason for giving me the sack’. Another noticeable feature of teachers, who had strong intrinsic motivation, was a positive work attitude and a willingness to quit the job if they underperformed:

I am concerned with not only money but also my honor. If I get money, but my honor is hurt, I will surely not work (I. 16: 96-97).

I have no worry when my professional competencies are proved, and I am always enthusiastic. I think that if I do my best, but the output does not meet the school’s requirements, I am happy to leave. Anyway, I just tried my best (I. 4: 149-152).

I think it [performance-based pay] is right. If my capacity is inadequate for work, I think I should leave for another workplace. I am very comfortable. If the School Administration Board said that I am unqualified, I will be okay and leave instantly. ... Because if I were not able to contribute or received salary I didn’t deserve, I would feel very uneasy (I. 9: 173-177).

These responses might imply that performance-based pay affected the teachers’ perception of performance requirements and fairness when working in Green School. These teachers put competencies and performance as critical factors determining whether employees stay or leave. With a high-level of self-respect, they always tried their best on

the one hand and felt ‘uneasy’ or ‘happy’ to leave if they were unqualified on the other hand.

In short, when working in a school autonomy context, teachers recognized the importance of both external motivations like salary and job security and intrinsic motivations like self-respect and self-development. Notably, their working motivations for salary and job security were quite different from those of other colleagues in regular public schools where a tenured-based system remained in place and job positions were highly secure.

Challenges to Teachers

School requirements.

Most interviewees agreed that working in Green School was very stressful because the school imposes many requirements on teachers. Research data revealed that the most frequently-mentioned challenge was the force of being always innovative.

One could say that working in this school is stressful. In comparison to other public schools, teachers in this school must play many roles and perform too many tasks. It is different from other schools where salary is the same from year to year, ‘you cannot dismiss me. I have tenure’. It creates resistance to change. In this school, you must always approach new ideas. Secondly, Green School maintains a different management mechanism than in other schools. It is closely-related to my money. It poses a massive pressure on teachers that they must always innovate. This mechanism is both a positive motivation and sometimes pressure on teachers (I. 2: 138-145).

The pressure is that I must always innovate (I. 9: 52).

Work pressure is huge. I must always do my best and try more. Despite being a senior teacher, sometimes I have to stay up late to prepare for teaching and lesson plans (I. 20: 180-182).

These responses reflected that on the one hand, the school set high requirements as an external force that teachers must always innovate in their work, do their best, and try more. On the other hand, it applied the performance-based pay system to create internal motivation for them. Teachers understood that if they did not constantly innovate, their salary and even job security would be affected. This practice could be explained that as Green School was a school where there are experimental new approaches in education such as school-based curriculum development, competency-based approach, inter-subject learning, it required teachers to be always updated with innovative tendencies. Creating innovation had become a core school value and contributed to the school's reputation because if teachers were not able to innovate, the school cannot maintain its leading role in education innovation and might lose its attraction to prospective students.

Besides, Green School laid down many requirements for teachers in teaching and learning, student-teacher relationships, and parent-teacher relationships:

It is quite stressful when the school always poses three critical questions to teachers that guide their work: 'Do students look forward to your [teacher's] teaching,' 'Are your colleagues willing to work with you,' and 'Do parents trust in what you've made?' It is very stressful when teachers must respond to all these requirements (I. 7: 17-21).

Those questions could be quite relevant to critical aspects of teacher appraisal. The school did not clearly state quantitative indicators for teachers like how much good feedback teachers must attain in peer-review or how many students gain high scores or are awarded in high-stakes exams. Alternatively, the school considered students,

colleagues, and parents as assessors for the teacher's work. It meant that teachers could enjoy considerable autonomy in work as long as they can satisfy these assessors. The first question reminded teachers that they must give priority to responding to students' expectations and requirements. If students did not look forward to teachers' teaching, it meant that teachers had failed to deliver good teaching and positive relationships with students. For colleagues, teachers were required to develop a positive relationship and prove their professional capacity in groups. Finally, teachers were expected to maintain harmonious relationship with parents and increase their trust in the school and teachers.

One could argue that these requirements were prevalent in most schools, and most teachers must satisfy them. However, pressures on teachers in Green School seemed to be more considerable because if teachers were not able to satisfy any one of these requirements, their salary would be decreased or they would be sacked. Teachers reported:

It is tough. I think in this school, all teachers have to try regardless of age, professional expertise, or working experience. Because the work environment requires a lot. And students, parents (I. 2: 164-166).

I feel that the number of teachers reluctantly changed over the years, some came, some went. One might feel one is suitable for the working environment in Green School where it is both comfortable and rigid because it renews itself continuously, and there are many excellent students. But if their performance is weak, they must go (I. 5: 215-218).

Many teachers had to go. The first reason is their professional capacity did not meet requirements. The second reason is they did not show enthusiasm for work. Or when work stress is too high, and they cannot handle it, they could voluntarily

quit the job. Or if I check their professional capacity, which is under requirement, I could report it to the school and give them the sack (I. 7: 56-59).

All teachers might share their feelings of worry and instability. You have to know that teachers are appraised through many sources. When I am at fault, I will be relieved of my lead teacher. When I teach ineffectively, the school will give me the sack (I. 7: 162-166).

There are two types of teachers who might not be able to adapt to the school environment, namely the old and the young. Old teachers have a significant advantage in teaching experience and professional knowledge. However, their adaptive capacity has been reduced. Young or newly graduated teachers might face a big gap between theory and practice. If they cannot quickly adapt to the environment, they might be dismissed (I. 3: 208-217).

These responses reflected that working in Green School was challenging for all teachers regardless of age, working position, and professional capacity. Young teachers were challenged to adapt to the work environment quickly. For senior teachers, as the work environment continually changes, they might lag. Even for lead teachers, they must cope with the big challenge of proving their capacity and leading role to colleagues. On the one hand, these school requirements were strong motivations for teachers to develop professionally and increase the quality of their performance. On the other hand, teachers might suffer the feeling of 'worry and instability' when coping with these requirements. This research data further proved that school autonomy increased stress on employees and led to a higher turnover rate.

Administrative tasks.

Another source of tension for teachers was a huge workload from administrative paper work because this field was regulated and controlled by governing bodies. Teachers were overwhelmed with fulfilling many administrative paperwork requirements.

I am satisfied with everything except with paperwork (I. 13: 136)

There are many administrative procedures in my school. I have not been familiar with some of them, like the teaching schedule log, deadlines for inputting students' marks; for example, we must finish this kind of assessment before this deadline. I have not been familiar with it. I can die because of paperwork (I. 5: 230-233).

These responses revealed extreme tiredness and a strong opposition of teachers to administrative tasks 'I can die because of paperwork.' This adverse reaction could be understandable since both interviewees were young, enthusiastic, and creative. Therefore, they wanted to contribute their efforts and creativeness to fulfill professional tasks rather than do manual work. The reason underlying this situation could be that Green School must apply a paper-based system of administrative management like other regular public schools under DoET, BoET's governance to ensure unified monitoring and control. The management system has been manual, outdated, and time-consuming while governing bodies have laid down many strict rules on operating it. The experiment of the administration app in recent years has doubled teacher work when they must operate both the paper-based and computer-based system. It could be argued that if governing bodies did not apply an effective administration system, teachers' tiredness and dissatisfaction would keep increasing and school resources would be significantly wasted. The stress of administrative tasks was even more severe when there are inspections or regular checks by governing bodies.

Every time there is an inspection visit, the whole school is helter-skelter (I. 6: 198)

The Bureau of Education and Training is especially close to us and inspects us ‘until we die.’ Whenever there is an inspection visit, both the principal and teachers have a fit of convulsions. It is so scary because one typical feature of inspection is they will not quit the task if they have not found mistakes yet (I. 26: 234-238).

There are many afternoons like this. We have to prepare for welcoming those who come from ‘the top’ and specialize in checking (I. 24: 270-271).

On the date of the interview appointment with Interviewee #24, teachers were suddenly notified that there would be an ad-hoc check of governing bodies the following day. It was observed that many teachers were sitting in the teacher lounge, keeping silent, and concentrating closely on doing administrative documents. It seemed that the school mainly holds its accountability to governing bodies via these administrative reports and documents. Interviewee #24 suggested a shorter interview because she needed a lot of time to deal with her papers. The interviewee and her colleagues might know very well that if they did not make complete reports and documents that day, they would be severely criticized for a small error by the higher authority the following day because the latter ‘will not quit the task if they have not found mistakes yet.’ Teachers used sarcastic descriptions like ‘the whole school is helter-skelter,’ ‘especially close to us,’ ‘inspect us until we die,’ ‘from principal to teachers have a fit of convulsions,’ ‘welcoming,’ ‘those who come from the top and specialize in checking.’ This data proved that a large amount of work from administrative papers and rigorous examination of governing bodies increased teachers’ work stress and reduced their job satisfaction.

Other interview data further showed that teachers just fulfilled these administrative requirements to respond to the checks of governing bodies:

If you set all seven objectives to students, they cannot fulfill any objective. They are just objectives that you draw on paper. You should only do one experiment, and your students can remember that one experiment rather than you introduce all seven experiments, and they remember nothing. If governing bodies check my paper, my documents have to display all objectives. But in fact, it is unreasonable. It has been unreasonable for a long time, but no one can do anything ... The school allowed us to do that. The school accepts that our students could attain one rather than know seven and gain nothing. ... I was very upset. But I must fulfill administrative papers to respond to rigid inspectors. But it is unrealistic in practice (I. 22, 114-126).

This response reflected a typical conflict between school innovations and governing bodies' resistance. In this case, the school allowed the teacher to remove unrealistic learning objectives in a lesson and concentrate on appropriate objectives only. However, when checking administrative papers, governing bodies required teachers to list all learning objectives according to textbooks. Although the teacher knew very well that attaining all seven learning objectives in one lesson was unrealistic and unreasonable, he as well as other teachers could not oppose the governing bodies. Consequently, this gap doubled teacher work when they had to prepare for two teaching and lesson plans: one for use in practice, and one for responding to governing bodies. This practice might increase teacher stress when they must do unreasonable things.

Maintaining relationship with parents.

In terms of school-parents relationships, research two sources of pressure on teachers emerged from the data. First, teachers must endure extreme stress when they are responsible to parents for student performance. One mathematics teacher shared:

Mathematics is a vital subject of every exam and accounts for a large amount of learning time in school education. Parents pay keen attention to the subject. They do not care about how good their students are in other subjects, whereas if students' performance in math is weak, parents might be sad and worried. Thus, we [teachers] are very stressed out (I. 1: 97-100).

Due to being influenced by an exam-oriented education, the main form of teacher and school accountability to parents was student performance. Parents did not care much about invisible gains like competency development or skill development but test scores only. Therefore, the biggest challenge to subject teachers, especially those who were teaching key subjects, was how to improve students' test scores. As mentioned above, the school posed three questions to teachers, and the last one was 'Do parents trust in what you [teachers] have made?' This question could be interpreted that teachers must do their best to make parents believe that their children were best prepared for tests and high-stakes exams. However, another teacher shared his problem:

Teachers are stress of students' performance. Parents always expect that their students can get good marks whereas reality is not always according to their expectations. If I evaluate students objectively and accurately, parents might be unsatisfied. This gap is a shortcoming. They always want that their students receive higher marks than is possible through the real ability of their students (I. 3: 172-176).

This quotation revealed a dilemma when parents shaped expectations higher than their students' capacity. For parents, higher test scores mean that their children might have a higher chance of being admitted into a prestigious university or that they can show off their children's achievement to neighbors or relatives. If teachers evaluated students accurately, parents might be unhappy and unsatisfied. In contrast, if teachers gave

students a higher mark to satisfy parents, students might inaccurately perceive their capacity.

Second, another challenge to teachers, especially homeroom teachers, is how to maintain positive relationship with parents. Experienced homeroom teachers shared their view:

Homeroom teachers must be diplomats. Being a diplomat to make parents trust in our school, then they send their children to our school, then the school can recruit more students and develop. If they do not send their children, the school would be in bankruptcy (I. 23: 315-318).

The biggest challenge of homeroom teachers is how to make parents and students satisfied. We have to be strict and carefully follow every task; thus, it is very time-consuming. If there is any problem, we have to solve it immediately. On the other hand, we must maintain a good relationship with parents and students. Dealing with problems without making any tension is a continuing conflict (I. 14: 191-197).

It could be interpreted that in public schools, homeroom teachers generally played an important role in monitoring and managing students to ensure their compliance with school regulations. Homeroom teachers also had a decisive voice in assessing student behavior, which was one of the crucial factors contributing to student performance²¹. Thus, most parents treated homeroom teachers with great respect in the expectation that they would pay more attention to or give more priority to their children. However, the responses in this study indicated that these homeroom teachers did not consider them at higher favor than parents. For Interviewee #23, she raised the opinion that ‘homeroom

²¹ In secondary schools, students are evaluated in terms of both academic performance (presented via test scores) and behavior (presented via school discipline compliance). Both of these two factors are taken into consideration when deciding students’ class upgrading or school transferring. For example, most upper secondary schools reviewed both academic performance and behavior when recruiting prospective students.

teachers must be diplomats' because they represent the school and directly deal with the complicated situations in school-parent relationship. She emphasized the significance of parents in school development 'if they do not send their children, the school would be in bankruptcy.' Therefore, the main task of a diplomatic homeroom teacher is 'to make parents trust in our school.' It could be seen once again that the teacher linked her daily work to the strategic development of Green School. She knew that every task of a homeroom teacher might contribute to the school's success in the long term. This idea was supported by Interviewee #14 when she considered parents and students as customers to be served. Similarly, for Interviewee #13, being a young teacher, she made every effort in building trust with students' parents. Homeroom teachers must effectively deal with student problems, 'make parents and students satisfied,' and 'maintain a good relationship with parents and students.' An investigation of research data found many illustrations of challenging situations for homeroom teachers. For instance:

The father of a student works in the Supreme People's Procuracy. He threatens to sue the school and homeroom teacher. That teacher said that 'I am not talking to authority but to my students' parent. You are not my boss' (I. 6: 407-413).

Other similar cases that present extreme reactions of parents to homeroom teachers, were also found in interviews and observations (O. 4: 66-67; O. 19: 144-186; I. 29: 124-147). While the available data was not able to conclude whether teachers were at fault or not, it is worth noting that these adverse reactions of parents were in contrast to the Vietnamese tradition of offering especial respect to teachers. It could be suggested that school autonomy changed the school-parents relationship. These parents might think that as they paid tuition fees for the school, they were able to have greater authority in setting higher requirements for teachers (or that teachers must even serve their needs). Teacher-parent tension and conflict could be widespread in many schools, but the work of

teachers in Green School was more complex and strenuous. As Green School's budget relied on parents' contribution, teachers must deal with problems carefully without creating any further tension to parents or ruin school reputation.

Teacher Participation in School-level Decisions

Observation provided data on teacher participation in contributing opinions to school issues that directly relate to their work, such as teaching and learning, student policies and regulations, and teacher appraisal. In most school meetings, the School Administration Board introduced a general framework or plan and called for teachers' comments. Teachers can voice their opinions in a straightforward way, and school managers greatly respected that feedback. For example:

We [the School Administration Board] expect that you [homeroom teachers] can give your opinions on what should we do. For issues that I have just shared, please comment on what should I modify or supplement. Because our desire is to know how to organize activities best because they are our output (O. 19: 210-213).

In terms of co-curricular activities in this March and April, I attached an appendix of evaluation criteria, which are changed slightly. This morning, Mr. T commented on some points that ... It would be great if you add some comments today. Otherwise, you can send your comments via a written document. We will collect all opinions to implement these activities better (O. 4: 74-80).

Fourthly, we will discuss the evaluation criteria for teacher performance for the second semester. We sent criteria to lead teachers and have received two responses already. ... Yes, you can comment now to finalize the criteria and implement it in the second semester (O. 3: 38-45).

This data showed that teachers in Green School could be considerably involved in ideas regarding school-level issues that were closely linked to their work. The school also

nurtured the value of encouraging and respecting teachers' opinions. After considering all teachers' opinions, however, the final decision would not be made by teachers but by the School Administration Board. This practice reflected the low participation of teachers in school issues that directly related to them.

An investigation of interview data found no evidence of the participation of teachers in school-level decisions such as making comments on school cost norms, or monitoring school budget and financial activities. There might be several explanations surrounding this situation. One possibility might be that teachers did not concern themselves with school issues outside of their own professional duties. Traditionally, deciding school matters is not something that's delegated to public school teachers. On the other hand, teachers might be overwhelmed with professional duties and have no time to concern themselves with school financial issues. They might also have no opportunity to involve in the decision-making process because discussing key school issues is restricted to all teachers. Another possibility might be that the School Administration Board in general and the school principal in particular play a decisive role in all school issues. The following interview data could illustrate this situation:

Question: The school principal is both a principal and general secretary of the Communist Party in this school. How does this situation influence school management?

Answer: I think it starts with the fact that the general secretary was voted and selected by teachers. ... All leaders of the party were selected by party members. They [party leaders] at least get support from party members. I do not think this is a barrier but an advantage because when party members trust in us [party leaders], we have to try a lot.... Actually, in Vietnam, the communist party just orients general goals rather than implements activities. For example, we set the Project of

applying a competency-based approach, and the School Administration Board implements it. The influence of the communist party might be [pause and think]. I do not think much about this matter, but I assume that the communist party in Vietnam is quite stable. It creates stability. There is no severe competition. The stability seems to be a safe work environment. The stability creates a positive influence. It's like a high consensus.

Question: What about the School Council?

Answer: There is also the School Council, which is formulated from the School Administration Board, Trade Union, People's Inspection, and parent representatives. For example, at the beginning of the school year, we discuss school development goals, and they are able to voice their opinions.

Question: Should the School Administration Board be independent from the School Council?

Answer: It [the School Administration Board] should be included in the School Council. ... There should be a high agreement in leading school activities. The members [of the School Administration Board and School Council] could be different, but all should be unified in terms of goals and objectives.

Question: Does the School Council supervise the work of the School Administration Board, for example, when the latter does something wrong?

Answer: Because all school issues are discussed thoroughly, we have never done anything wrong. For example, before the School Administration Board implements anything, we have to reach a prior agreement. We must comply with the plan rather than decide by ourselves. Thus, whether there is supervision or not, we just implement the goals and tasks that we set. Supervision might be the task of the People's Inspection. ... In my school, for People's Inspection, there is a

very straightforward teacher. If there is any problem, she will voice her opinion. There might be conflicts or problems in other schools but not in my school. In other schools, if inspectors are ineffective, teachers might sue to higher governing bodies. But that situation does not occur in my school. Thus, inspectors turn to be less important. Because all teachers feel happy and there is no problem.

This quotation might hint at several problems in terms of the school structure. According to data, there are three bodies involved in school management, which are the School Administration Board, the Communist Party, and the School Council. First, the School Administration Board included one school principal and two vice-principals, of which the latter played an advisory role, and the former played a decisive role in most important school matters. Second, the Communist Party included all communist party members in the school, and its general secretary was the school principal. Interview data showed that the Communist Party played an orienting role for school strategic developments but had a minor role in deciding or managing specific school issues. Third, the School Council was established due to the requirement of national regulations (MoET, 2011a) and included the School Administration Board, the Trade Union, the People's Inspection²², and parent representatives. The School Council seemed to function as an advisory body rather than a supervising body when school council members are only able to be involved in discussing school development goals or general school matters. Although there was no data on how school council decisions were made, it is worth noting that the school principal was also the president of the council. Since the role of the School Council was not found in any other interview or observation data, it seemed that the body has a weak influence on school decisions. Fourth, the People's Inspection

²² People's Inspection is teachers who are selected to play as a site-based inspection to monitor school practice, and report violations or conflicts (if any).

was a legally supervising body to deal with violations or conflicts in the school community. However, members of People's Inspection were selected from schoolteachers, and this body was put under the management of the School Administration Board. One possible consequence might be that internal inspectors would not feel free to report school problems, especially those relating to the School Administration Board, when they were primarily affected by the School Administration Board, and the school principal decided both their salary and job security. During the interview, the interviewee reflected a favorable scenario such as the communist party organization creating 'stability' in the school environment, the school 'has never done anything wrong' because 'all school issues are discussed thoroughly', 'we have to reach a prior agreement', school inspections turn out to be 'less important' because the school had no problem. On a positive side, this data highlighted values of stability, discussing and agreement, and a healthy work environment. However, one underlying problem might be that the school structure was lacking a powerful supervising body, which is independent of the School Administration Board. The supreme school authority was put in the School Administration Board in general and the school principal in particular. The school principal was also the general secretary of the communist party in the school, president of the School Council, and has the ultimate authority to decide salary and job security of teachers in the People's Inspection. It could be seen that the current school structure grants broad authority to the school principal, and consequently, there is nearly no space for teachers to voice their opinions or decide school-level issues.

Professional Groups

Lead teachers.

Research data showed that one noteworthy feature of Green School was the high autonomy of lead teachers. They described their work:

I deal with all tasks of a lead teacher: managing professional issues, being responsible for matters relating to my subject to the school such as school curriculum, teacher monitoring. If there are regular or ad-hoc checks, I must hold accountability for my professional group (I. 7: 4-8).

The school has recently increased the autonomy for lead teachers, which is equivalent to that of a vice-principal in regular public schools. First, we must contribute to the school curriculum. Second, we must devise a teaching and learning schedule for one school year with every detail regarding weeks and days. Third, we must finalize the school curriculum in our subject, test, and assessment matters. Fourth, we must report to the School Administration Board on the current situation or new problems that have been brought up and propose improvement ideas. Fifth, we must assure quality for internship training. I check teachers' preparation before they create model teaching for student teachers (I. 3: 32-40).

It is interpreted that these functions of lead teachers in Green School were somewhat similar to those of their peers in other regular public schools, but the former enjoyed higher authority in making decisions in professional matters. In terms of making a teaching and learning schedule, for example, lead teachers in regular public schools must make a draft and submit it to a vice-principal or school principal for approval. In Green School, lead teachers had extensive autonomy over devising schedules with unremarkable interventions of the School Administration Board. Similarly, they can decide most professional matters relating to tests and assessment without seeking approval from the school principal. One distinct feature of lead teachers in Green School was that they played a decisive role in school-based curriculum development. Instead of merely implementing a national curriculum, lead teachers must lead member teachers to develop the school-based subject curriculum. In terms of professional development, lead

teachers had the authority in ‘organizing teacher professional development activities in the group’ such as planning training topics, inviting expert speakers (O. 3: 46-47).

Observation data showed that most training courses were organized according to the proposal of lead teachers (O. 6; 12; 18). Last, lead teachers played a decisive role in ‘reporting personnel needs and proposing a recruitment plan, and ‘proposing teaching task arrangement for member teachers’ according to the teacher appraisal results (O. 3: 74-79).

On a positive side, interview data revealed that high autonomy for lead teachers might increase their work commitment and work efficiency:

Because lead teachers in other secondary schools are not as strongly decentralized as those in Green School, they might be not as dedicated to professional work or to member teachers. My university friends, there are 93 of them, called me ‘unusual.’ Because they cannot think that for my subject in this current education, we cannot do those things. Of course, everyone might hold different perspectives. I have a presentation on the autonomy of lead teachers in public schools.

Increasing autonomy for lead teachers is a solution to implement the school-based curriculum (I. 18: 122-131)

This interviewee was a lead teacher of a ‘minor’ subject that traditionally did not get much attention from students. However, thanks to enjoying professional autonomy, she successfully organized many engaging activities for students. Her university friends called her ‘unusual,’ which means she can do things that colleagues in regular public schools were not able to do. It is suggested that when enjoying high autonomy in professional matters, she might be aware of her crucial role in a teacher group and thus demonstrate a more passionate commitment to realize her innovative ideas. She concluded that ‘increasing autonomy for lead teachers is a solution to implement the

school-based curriculum.’ Her opinion could be interpreted as arguing that when implementing the school-based curriculum, the lead teacher was the key figure who has profound knowledge and expertise in a subject to lead and instruct teacher members to develop the subject curriculum.

On the other hand, professional autonomy is always accompanied by responsibility. One lead teacher shared:

Professional autonomy granted to lead teachers is sufficient. If the lead teacher can fully exercise their autonomy, the School Administration Board might reduce stress and workload. ... I am responsible for the quality of the member teachers in the group. If teachers are unqualified, I have to report it to the Administration Board, and I will not assign teaching tasks for the next semester. If a teacher's performance is too weak, I cannot rank him or her as ‘Good’ because the Administration Board has no ground to punish the teacher. Therefore, the lead teacher plays an essential role in assuring educational quality. In a recent school meeting, I raised the opinion that the lead teachers must be responsible for their member teachers. Thus, I have to observe teaching more, and then I have a consultation with the School Administration Board about who should or should not be assigned tasks. Or I could invite school inspection to check member teachers [if they underperform] (I. 23: 254-263).

In this response, the lead teacher viewed her autonomy not as the freedom to make decisions but as responsibility and accountability to the Administration Board for the quality of member teachers. She perceived that her work was to reduce workload for the School Administration Board. As being fully responsible for the quality of teaching in that subject and the performance of every member teacher, lead teachers must manage the work of member teachers very well. Although there was no clear evidence, one possible

consequence could be that lead teachers might tightly check teachers' work and intervene in teacher autonomy. As one teacher member reflected:

It is quite regular. She [the lead teacher] checks teaching and lesson plans nearly once a month. She holds a group meeting once a month. Sometime she checks several times per month. Or when having free time, she will check. You must submit all your preparation (I. 13: 106-108)

Interview data showed that another consequence of granting significant autonomy to lead teachers is abuse of power. The school principal gave an example:

The more authority I grant them, the higher the accountability they must hold. The problem is sometimes they misuse their authority or put their thought to work. They might hate someone, or when there are young teachers who are better than them. Then they would assign tasks, which are not a disadvantage but make their subordinates feel out of energy. For example, key subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry might be especially crucial in Class A [classes with students who will take Block A that includes mathematics, physics, and chemistry in the national university entrance examination] but less important in Class D [Classes with students who will take Block D that includes mathematics, English language, and literature in the national university entrance examination]. Excellent teachers were just assigned to teach in Class D. Certainly they knew how to teach, but they might think that they are underestimated. ... I decentralized lead teachers to assign teacher tasks. When they submitted the plan of task arrangement, I did not hesitate ... to ask why this good teacher was assigned to teach in Class D, and he should be in Class A. (I. 25: 362-378)

As a method of management, all plans must be submitted to me. They cannot do whatever they wish. Teachers' task arrangement must be submitted. Then there

are weekly reports, monthly reports, what they [teachers] did, who did good jobs, who made mistakes. I manage by this reporting mechanism (I. 25: 388-391).

In this response, the principal pointed out several problems accompanying granting autonomy to lead teachers. They might ‘misuse authority,’ ‘put their personal thought to work,’ or mistreat member teachers, and ‘make their subordinates feel out of energy.’ To avoid these adverse situations, the principal required that all plans be submitted to her, and she agrees with lead teachers’ proposals in most cases. When realizing that a point is unreasonable, she would further discuss with lead teachers to find a more appropriate solution. In addition, the principal managed lead teachers via a wide range of reports. These methods could be useful in terms of controlling the work of lead teachers and avoiding misuse of authority. However, this intervention of the principal could decrease decentralization of lead teachers, and the reporting system might increase the burden of administrative tasks for lead teachers.

Diversity encouragement.

Interview data presented the fact that teachers frequently mentioned ‘teachers’ identity.’ They recognized that Green School was a diverse teacher community with many ‘colors.’

Every teacher has his or her unique strength. He or she makes one color, and all of the best colors are presented here (I. 16: 38-40).

Everyone has their own identity, depending on their personal characteristics.

Identity means that we cannot be blended in with colleagues or students. One might have strength in style; others might have strength in voice, or professional knowledge (I. 19: 302-304).

These teachers defined teachers’ identity at the individual level such that ‘unique strength’ or ‘personal characteristic’ made teachers not able to be ‘blended in with

colleagues or students.’ Teachers recognized and respected different identities in the teacher community. More importantly, they considered those differences as a useful source for professional development. For example:

From Ms. H, I can learn her way of student management. She manages students strictly to ensure that they have to learn because sometimes when teachers lose attention, students will be distracted from learning. From Ms. V., I can learn her teaching and learning method, that teaching should be derived from the root and nature of knowledge and how to develop summary questions and exercises. Mr. H. has a systematic view of design testing questions. Mr. D. has strength in doing scientific experiments (I. 22: 56-62).

I learn a lot from my colleagues. For example, Mr. T. attracts students’ attention because he often tells fascinating stories and makes a joke. I realize that I should not keep the whole lesson formal, but I should find amusing stories relating to the lesson to make it more interesting. The lesson should not be very formal, but it should be up and down. Another example is that Ms. H. is very careful. She regularly checks students’ homework and dedicates herself to students’ learning. Thus, I can learn much about student management (I. 20: 45-52).

These responses could hint that teachers carefully observed their colleagues and selected appropriate features to learn and adopt. The teachers ‘learn a lot from colleagues’ and then apply these to improve their own teaching practice. However, when adopting good practice from colleagues, teachers had a strong desire for developing their own color. When being asked ‘What is your color?’ teachers quickly and confidently responded:

I think I am a positive thinker, I have a humanistic perspective of students and life, and I could inspire students to have that view (I. 19: 307-308)

I am a dedicated teacher in work (I. 20: 24)

I think my color is ... I can introduce problems and instruct students to solve them;

I can make lessons more funny and exciting, I can use many teaching and learning methods (I. 22: 84-85)

It could be interpreted that these teachers clearly understood their strength and tried to promote these identities such as being a positive thinker, holding a humanistic perspective, being dedicated to work, or being able to use many teaching and learning methods. They promoted personal identities with a clear purpose of enhancing their capacity and improving their work rather than merely showing off their unique features. Promoting personal identities seemed to be in contrast with Vietnamese traditional culture and the context of public organizations that put more emphasis on organizational collectivism and similarity rather than individual differences. Generally, in an organization, employees rarely present their characteristics and tend to act as a plurality to avoid conflict and judgment. In contrast, interviewees reported that Green School strongly supported promoting teachers' identities.

You can freely innovate. The school or group does not ban your innovations.

Every teacher can develop their identities. They can maximally innovate to make lessons more attractive (I. 22: 81-82).

Every teacher here can feel free to be creative. Everyone can make a typical identity. Thus, all work is done enthusiastically (I. 20: 20-22).

It could be seen that the school encouraged teachers to show their typical identity.

There might be several justifications underlying this feature of Green School. First, when working with many excellent colleagues, teachers might feel that being a good teacher was not enough, but they must prove their strengths through unique personal values. Second, the teacher appraisal system might contribute to this feature. For

example, when students can reflect their opinions of teachers, teachers might be motivated to show their distinctive values to attract attention and/or get support from students. Third, extensive teacher autonomy allows them to realize their innovative ideas and foster personal identities. Last, teachers' identity might be rooted in the school philosophy that every teacher is an essential part of the school community. The school principal recognized that 'the most important thing is my companion' (I. 26: 233). Teachers were not subordinates to her leadership but 'companions' in a development journey. She shared her philosophy of leading a self-financed school:

School autonomy - first and foremost, it must promote the strength of everyone and create school community power. When being part of school autonomy, if one 'died,' others would as well. So why do we have to die? Let's live happily together (I. 26:128-130):

This quotation could be explained as indicating that school autonomy increased inter-dependence between school members - 'if one 'died,' others would as well.' It is worth noting that the principal mentioned 'the strength of everyone' first and 'school community power' later on. It seemed that she put the objective of individual teacher development as the priority and considered it the foundation of building school power. The school encouraged teachers to fully develop their potential and innovations instead of forcing all teachers to conform to unified standards because when teachers are happy and confident to demonstrate their values, they would be extremely motivated to contribute to school development. The more diverse the values the teachers had, the more diverse and stronger the school community was.

At the group level, interview data did not provide strong evidence on the teacher group's identity because it seems to be in its infant phase. Teachers can work together in professional groups, but they might not have clear ideas of creating distinctive group

features. Developing teacher group values was just the idea of the school principal. She actively inspired this idea in both regular conversations and official school meetings. For example:

The lead teacher of the physics group is interested in creating a unique identity. This year they organized a student research contest because I asked them ‘What are you going to do?’ Then in that evening, they initiated the contest. ... Or I stimulated ‘the literature teachers’ group has a lot of solidarity. They always go together, have lunch together, they mutually support one another, they observe teaching’ (I. 25: 378-383).

In a school meeting with lead teachers, she raised this issue:

I suggest that you pay attention to developing solidarity in teacher groups. Every activity should demonstrate the typical characters of groups. There are school conferences, reports, posters. There should be close cooperation between members in all activities to operate activities smoothly (O. 3: 86-89).

The fourteenth issue is how to establish the unique character of teacher groups. We are concerned about how we could be happy when working, how can we feel happy when going to school. Mathematics group or other groups develop data sources and share it with our colleagues to use when making teaching and learning plans. We expect that teacher groups will develop their own characters. And the core value is solidarity, a will to share and mutually support one another, and how to improve the professional competencies of every teacher. There was a meeting between the Board of Organization and physics, biology, technology groups to prepare for the coming innovation contest. I think this is also a typical feature of group character. It is not only the cooperation between members of one teacher group but also between members of different groups (O. 3: 377-388)

In this meeting, the goal of developing a group identity was introduced as necessary as other professional matters. It meant that the principal was concerned with realizing this goal. Teacher group identity was not an abstract idea, but it could be nurtured from small daily things such as having lunch together, making teaching observations or helping each other in work. The principal pointed out several good practices of teacher groups such as the physics teachers were passionate about doing research, literature teachers had a lot of solidarity and were supportive, and mathematics teachers collaborated to develop shared resources. In these responses, to encourage group identity, the principal listed a number of benefits that were close to individual teachers and groups rather than benefits to the school. She expected that promoting teacher group identity might increase group solidarity, improve the professional competencies of every member, and most importantly, make teachers feel happy when working in a group and the school. Furthermore, teacher group identity did not cause groups to be isolated from others but increased cooperation and sharing between groups to learn mutually. This response reflected the perspectives and efforts of the school principal to establish a diverse school community and increase school strength. However, other research data did not provide much evidence relating to this category. One reason might be that teacher group identity in Green School was just recently initiated by the school principal. In addition, since no reward or commendation brought specific benefits to teacher members, teachers might have less motivation to contribute to group identity and consider it as an unrequired task.

Tenured, visiting, and contractual teachers.

There were three types of teachers working in Green School, including tenured teachers, visiting teachers, and contractual teachers. The tenured teachers, which accounted for a small number, were recruited by the governing body. Although they were

also under performance-based pay, their job position was secured by a tenure mechanism. Visiting teachers were those who were working in universities or other secondary schools and mainly involved in teaching tasks in Green School. Last, most remaining teachers were contract-based teachers whose work was accorded to the labor contract. Interview data showed that this diversity feature led to both opportunities and challenges to professional groups.

Visiting teachers. Interviewees pointed out that the most remarkable advantage of visiting teachers was their professional qualifications and reputation.

In terms of advantages, visiting teachers are prestigious teachers in other schools. Thus, they can immediately be involved in teaching without mentoring or in-service training (I. 3: 223-235)

There are five visiting teachers in my group, which accounts for half. Among them, two teachers are university lecturers, one is a retired teacher, one a secondary teacher ... I think it is advantageous. Two visiting teachers are university lecturers. I just hold a doctoral degree, but another is even an associate professor.... She is the lead of the Didactic group at the university, and I am the vice-lead. I think it is beneficial. My predecessor was retired and then stayed here. She has a profound professional experience. Another is an excellent teacher in a secondary school. And the last one is a graduate of an advanced program, and she recruited via a recruitment test. Thus, all visiting teachers are qualified in terms of professional capacity (I. 7: 35-45)

The principal has to maintain school prestige. Because visiting teachers significantly contribute to school prestige. They are professors, doctoral degree holders, and excellent teachers from other schools (I. 6: 448-463).

There are eight visiting teachers in my group, which is equivalent to a the number of full-time teachers. Of course, most visiting teachers are university lecturers.

This feature is a great advantage because they are good at professional ... And they have valuable experience (I. 8: 33-38).

It could be seen that visiting teachers were highly recognized in terms of professional capacity when they were experienced and prestigious teachers from other schools. Although interview data did not provide clear evidence as to whether visiting teachers could produce better teaching quality than others could, one apparent benefit was the school could increase the reputation and attract more students thanks to the presence of visiting teachers.

On the other hand, interviewees reflected the disadvantage of visiting teachers:

It is disadvantageous when assigning work. As they work in many organizations, they cannot devote themselves full time to the school (I. 3: 226-227).

But visiting teachers are less committed than full-time teachers. Because they are not fully involved in school activities (I. 8: 36-37)

In my school, there are few tenured teachers while many visiting ones. It is quite tough to mobilize all teachers to be involved in activities. ... For visiting teachers, they might be more active, and they can go out and experience more. But as I said, one minus point is a low commitment (I. 3: 206-212).

Many visiting teachers only come to the school for teaching and then go. ... There are new and old teachers, we do not know each other very well, we do not often talk, and thus we do not understand each other (I. 1: 244-252)

It could be seen that a low school commitment was the major limitation of visiting teachers when they cannot devote themselves full-time to the school. For example, in the teacher training, one teacher said that 'This is a rare opportunity in which all teachers can

join together' (O. 6: 62-63). It seemed that visiting teachers did not often participate in school activities. In addition, interviewees also showed that because visiting teachers 'come to the school for teaching only and then go,' teachers in a group had less chance to strengthen collegiality or discuss professional issues. Despite these limitations, the school must maintain visiting teachers for the following reasons:

Moreover, if the school recruits many teachers, it must spend more on not only salaries but also other bonuses. It increases the burden on the school budget (I. 6: 442-444).

I think the school principal is tired of this problem. For example, in my group, we really lack teachers. But if the school recruits one new teacher, can it arrange enough work for him or her? Because of the number of sessions, for example, Ms. H has the most in the group. In this second semester, she has only 12 sessions per week. When multiplying 12 sessions with 80,000 VND [about US \$ 4], do you think it ensures a livelihood? Of course not. Thus, if recruiting tenured teachers, the school cannot ensure their livelihood. That is the problem. In other subjects like mathematics, literature, or English, it is different in that there are many full-time teachers. If mathematics teachers, for example, just need to teach two classes, their workload is 20 sessions per week, because it is a key subject. Therefore, there are many full-time teachers in those subjects. For my subject, there is only one session or two sessions per week; thus, some teachers teach only 6 or 8 sessions per week (I. 6: 448-463)

These quotations indicated a complex problem in teacher groups of 'minor subjects.' For these subjects, the school must limit full-time positions (including contractual and tenured teachers) and invite visiting teachers to reduce pressures on the

school budget. Moreover, as the teaching workload of these subjects is light, the school could not arrange enough tasks and ensure a livelihood for newly recruited teachers.

Contractual teachers - a sense of instability. Contractual teachers accounted for the lion's share in Green School. In several interviews with young teachers, they shared the feeling of instability when working without tenured security.

Because our school applies a different mechanism from other public schools, we maintain a contract-based instead of a tenure-based management. It places teachers under pressure (I. 22: 12-13).

In my school, there are a few tenured positions. ... The school is trying to deal with this limitation. It tries to increase tenured positions and reduce contract-based teachers. For a young teacher like me, I feel unstable. Tenured position are very few (I. 5: 206-210).

These responses might hint at several consequences from the contract-based mechanism. First, the school might face a higher turnover rate when young teachers moved to regular public school to work in a more stable environment. Traditionally, Vietnamese people prefer a stable life with fewer fluctuations and changes. The intention of quitting the job was more popular among young teachers when their professionalism was not proved, and they might be concerned about losing the job if their performance was low. For the case of Interviewee #5, for instance, he seemed to prefer a tenured position to secure his job. In another interview, one teacher gave an example:

There were two teachers whom I had observed in their classes every month. When they became experienced, they quit the job. Why? Because we have no tenured positions, we will have a brain drain. Two physics teachers, whom I like so much. My colleagues said that when the principal trained them successfully, the school

would have the best physics teachers in the city. When they were more experienced, they applied for tenured positions in School N. (I. 25: 313-317). Green School might be unsuitable for those who prefer stability and tenured positions. These people would feel scared of a competitive working environment. They might be unsure whether they could stay or be fired tomorrow or the next semester. If they cannot get rid of that perception, they cannot work in Green School (I. 3: 242-243).

It is suggested that a contract-based mechanism in accompaniment with performance-based pay placed teachers under considerable pressure and might lead to their decision to leave. For some teachers, performance-based pay might be a positive motivation for them to take up the challenge and prove their capacity, but those who prefer stability and permanent tenure might feel scared or at risk when working in a competitive environment. ‘They might be unsure whether they could stay or be fired tomorrow or the next semester.’

‘Tenure is such a long story.’ The school principal shared her dilemma in terms of the tenure mechanism:

Yes, I can sack visiting teachers. But for tenured teachers, I can only reduce their work. They are gradually retired. There are only 21 people now. It is quite difficult with the current mechanism in Vietnam. I have a problem in that because there are few tenured teachers, I cannot select a vice principal from among the schoolteachers. Insofar as this is concerned with strategic school development, there is a need for alternative human resources. But these 21 tenured teachers, some are the children or relatives of very important persons, some are not good. But I still need tenured teachers, because according to the current promotion mechanism, a vice-principal cannot be elected from contractual staff but only

from tenured ones. I wish that when I finish my principalship, there will be someone who continues my strategy, I would be happier. Otherwise, it would be regrettable. ... I need excellent teachers to become tenured ones. Tenure is such a long story (I. 29: 255-296).

Although this is a self-financed school, there are problems relating to governing bodies. Secondly, for those who have been working here for a long time and promoted to high positions ..., the principal cannot treat them seriously and dismiss them. For example, in my group, the principal cannot dismiss those who have been working here for a long time and recruit new teachers ... There are similar cases in other groups (I. 6: 437-447).

These quotations raised two problems regarding the tenure mechanism in Green School. First, in spite of enjoying school autonomy in personnel management, Green School remained as a public school and had to offer a specific account of tenured positions. The principal mentioned nepotism, which was one burning issue in most public schools when teachers were recruited thanks to the power or influence of their relatives. Another prevalent problem in public schools was seniority. Most tenured teachers have worked in the school for a long time and had a significant influence on colleagues. Due to the traditional value of respecting seniority, every solution offered by senior teachers must be taken under deliberation. Thus, even when these teachers presented weak performance, the school was not able to easily dismiss them but only reduce their workload or wait for their retirement. It is suggested that a tenure mechanism might be a disadvantage to personnel management in a school autonomy context because other teachers might feel it's unfair when performance-based pay was not thoughtfully applied, or they might feel uncomfortable when working with weak tenured teachers. Second, according to school regulations, school managers must hold a tenured position, and it

meant that all contractual teachers had no chance to be promoted to vice-principal or principal positions. This regulation might discourage contractual teachers because their promotion possibility was minimal. For the current situation of tenured staff, the principal realized that she could not find potential candidates for the vice-principal position because the most excellent and active teachers were contractual only.

Facilitating young teachers.

Interview data reflected that one positive value of the school and teacher groups was a trust in young teachers. A young mathematics teacher, who has just more than one-year of working experience, reported that the school created equal opportunities for all teachers to be involved in challenging work to develop themselves professionally.

Opportunities are equal to all. Since my first year, I was assigned to teach a pilot curriculum and textbook. Now young teachers can also be involved in composing tests. ... In general, the school puts absolute trust in teachers and facilitates us as much as possible. In other schools, they might be careful about allowing young teachers to design tests for semester exams. In contrast, our school strongly encourages us to do that. In other schools, only excellent teachers might be assigned to teach excellent students whereas in our school, those who are capable are encouraged to actively register with the School Administration Board and take over (I. 9: 77-85).

It could be interpreted that under a tenure-based mechanism in public schools and a traditional culture of honoring seniority in Vietnamese society, senior teachers were most respected and assigned important tasks. In contrast, Green School encouraged young teachers to develop themselves professionally and prove their capacity. This strategy could enhance equity in the work environment and stimulate teachers' efforts. The young

might make every effort to gain new opportunities while the seniors might try more to maintain their position and raise their prestige.

Similarly, the following case further illustrated that the principal trusted in young teachers and challenged them by taking over demanding work:

I also asked her [the school principal] like that. 'Because you are a responsible person,' she said. When I was a student, I had to study hard to get a good record. Moreover, when I had started work, I was quite good at class management. You know if a teacher is older, five or six years older, students are likely to take the mickey. But luckily when I taught them, they were quite good, my work was quite comfortable. After five months, both my professional expertise and class management capacity were great. I was evaluated as being responsible. Thus, she assigned me to be a homeroom teacher. At first, she was anxious. She called me to her office to talk and mentor me many times. Then she assigned the task. During that time, she collected information from many sources like parents, students to track how I managed the class. There has been no problem so far (I. 13: 206-215)

In this case, although the interviewee had only one-year working experience, she was assigned to be a homeroom teacher. This important position was taken over by experienced teachers. The principal did not leave the young teacher alone but carefully mentored her. She also kept tracking other teachers to be regularly informed about the young teacher and provided support if necessary. It meant that the principal did not merely assign challenging work to young or less experienced teachers, but she provided significant encouragement and support for their professional development. The principal shared her strategy:

There was one training session for young teachers who are going to be homeroom teachers next year. I frequently organize training because I am going to assign

work for them. Two months ago, I made a tentative training schedule for them:

how to be homeroom teachers, how to make class management plans (I. 27: 4-8).

This special attention to young teachers could be attributed to the fact that Green School has been implementing many innovations such as the school-based curriculum, a competency-based approach. Young teachers would be the most important factor because they were likely to be most active in supporting changes and experimenting with new approaches. Therefore, facilitating and supporting young teachers, assigning them challenging tasks were a good strategy for the principal to develop teacher professionalism to realize school visions and to gain more support for her innovative ideas.

Empathy.

Previous findings showed that a diverse teacher community featured in Green School. The school respects individual values, trusts in young teachers, and always encourages innovative ideas. Research data showed another value that teachers had great empathy for others' mistakes. First, this value was most clearly presented via the view of the school principal. She shared:

There is a truth that even the worst person has some good points; nobody is entirely evil. My father said that 'Even a thief might like to contribute to charity.' Thus, the important thing is one should encourage good points of others and not pay attention too much to their weak points. Everybody has weak points. I also have a long list of weak points. Listen and try to understand them, even when they make mistakes (I. 29: 166-171).

This data could be interpreted as indicating that the principal tended to look on the bright side and trust in the good nature of people. She understood that everybody has good and bad points, and school leaders should encourage the good character of people

instead of focusing on their weaknesses. Next, the principal shared her view on dealing with subordinate's mistakes:

I recognized one truth after five years of being a principal, the most important thing when making a mistake is admitting it. No matter how big the mistake is. Because the most important thing about admitting mistakes is sincerity (I. 29: 215-218).

Vietnamese people have great empathy. No matter how serious the fault is, as long as it will never occur again. It is quite funny in this school. When teachers have a fault, they are ashamed of seeing me because they must be accountable for their fault. I think it is okay when they are ashamed rather than that they panic. They are ashamed because they do not expect that fault. Then we can discuss what we should do tomorrow to repair the fault (I. 29: 247-252).

The belief in the positive sides of people influenced the way that the school principal responded and dealt with other's mistakes. For her, making mistakes was inevitable for everybody, and she believed that her subordinates always made every effort and did not make mistakes on purpose. She expressed her willingness to forgive them no matter how big the mistake is as long as the mistake makers are humble and try to correct problems rather than blame others. If they recognized their mistake, she gently advised them and encouraged them to self-improve. One justification underlying this perspective might be the norm of conflict avoidance and respect for personal prestige in Vietnamese culture. Besides, 'Vietnamese people have great empathy' and tend to forgive others. Another reason might be derived from the principal's view that highly valued teachers as companions in school leadership and believed in the good nature of people.

The view of the principal has been realized in her school leadership practice. For instance, one young art teacher was investigated for his careless teaching plans by

external inspectors, and thus, the school's external assessment result was strongly affected. However, in the school meeting, the principal did not severely criticize him for the fault but discussed how to overcome his limitations (I. 29: 235-243):

After that meeting, he met me and asked, 'why are you [the principal] so intelligent?'. Then I told him 'the most important thing that I did not tell you in the meeting today is you are bothering other teachers. They had to join the meeting because of your mistakes. You are bothering the school and me. It is effortless to do that [preparing the teaching plan], why cannot you do it. This must be the last time this fault happens. Because if you make mistakes one more time, I will not talk to you like this'. He said, 'thank you so much.' Several days later, he reported that he corrected the limitations in the teaching plan.

In this case, because a young art teacher might be unfamiliar with strict administrative regulations, the school principal did not publicly criticize him but advised him privately. This reaction would save face for him and encourage him to do his best the next time.

Interview data provided many pieces of evidence regarding the value of empathy. One young teacher shared her experience when having failed the first working year; her colleagues did not criticize her but instead actively supported her to overcome these difficulties:

After my first unsuccessful year, other teachers gave me many recommendations and suggestions. How to become a homeroom teacher in this school, how to be suitable, how to respond to students, which methods should be used (I. 24: 124-126).

Another teacher shared her story:

It was a clear memory that will stay with me for the rest of my life. On that day, I was sick, and I had to leave school. ... There was a problem when I was at home. When the principal was calling me, I was so nervous. I had a fever. And it seemed that the fever became more serious because I did not know which problem had occurred in the school. Her first sentence was 'How are you?' I felt a little bit relaxed. Then 'Are you better now?' I felt much more relaxed. She just talked about work in the third sentence 'There was a problem that, now the problem is ..., you just need to take a rest, I solved it.' Thus, I was so moved. She did not reproach me that I did not fulfill the task but instead encouraged me. I think for the leader, I have no reason to refuse to work passionately and in a dedicated way (I. 4: 91-103).

In these cases, teachers might not make a mistake on purpose, but they might lack work experience. Therefore, for Interviewee #9, she was not criticized but gained support to overcome her difficulties. In the second case, the principal might understand that the teacher just unintentionally made mistakes. Therefore, the former did not reproach the latter but just informed her of the situation and showed her interest in the teacher's health. The reaction of the school principal made a positive influence on her subordinate when the teacher really appreciated it and then increased her work efforts.

At the professional group level, teachers also shared the value of empathy and support for mistake-makers. For example:

If one made a mistake, others would treat him or her kindly. Mistakes are unavoidable, and everybody could make a mistake. All teachers are straightforward and helpful. ... For example, when one teacher taught a lesson wrong. Wrong teaching is unavoidable, isn't it? When we identify the fault, the teacher group will assign one senior teacher or all members to find solutions, for

instance, making an explanation. For severe mistakes, experienced teachers will give advice or directly deal with it. More importantly, we do not make the situation worse or harm the school's reputation (I. 7: 145-153).

When one has been mistaken, generally our teacher group gains experience from that mistake. The lead teacher could criticize but not seriously. Or she [lead teacher] can have a private talk with the mistake maker. Then she will monitor whether he or she makes improvements (I. 13: 193-197).

As teachers considered mistake as unavoidable and undesired, they did not severely criticize mistake makers but treated him or her helpfully and in a straightforward way, finding solutions together, and gaining experience from the mistake. Once again, the influence of cultural features can be seen in the teachers' reaction and behavior. In all cases, teachers had a strong perception of protecting the reputation of the teacher and school through 'having a private talk with the mistake maker,' 'not making the situation worse or harming the school's reputation.' In short, strategies to deal with teachers' mistakes were minimizing public criticism, giving advice, and encouraging self-improvement.

Theme 4. School Values

Dedication to Students

Respecting student autonomy.

Interview data showed that student autonomy could be one typical feature of Green School. One teacher recognized the contribution of students in school activities:

Students in this school are very active. They can be involved in all activities. They organize all the activities. If there were no contributions of students, school activities would be unsuccessful ... Students are very fond of organizing activities (I. 2: 89-94)

Observation data added that students participated and played an essential role in most school activities. For instance, in Observation #1, students confidently introduced their school to a foreign delegation and answered the questions of guests. In Observation #10, students of the English Club were assigned to support a Swedish intern in terms of introducing the school, providing necessary information on Vietnamese culture, and arranging the schedule to work with student clubs. In Observation #15, two students of a student club joined a school meeting with teachers to devise plans for an upcoming school event. In Observation #17, when preparing a school conference, the principal initiated a call for student presentations:

I have an idea that we should add students' presentations to the conference agenda ... I suggest that we can select students who have good voices and presentation skills to present student clubs in about 5 to 7 minutes. Thus, most student clubs can contribute one paper or poster introducing the club ... I am sure that if there are student presentations, the conference will be very impressive and exciting (O. 17: 111-123).

It is interpreted that students in Green School enjoyed a higher autonomy than their peers in regular public schools. The above examples such as taking part in teacher meetings, representing the school to work to foreign interns, organizing school events, or making presentations in a school conference were rare practices in other public schools. Although students in other schools could be somewhat involved in school activities, their tasks were mostly planned and led by teachers. It was uncommon for them to be able to introduce their ideas and realize them without decisive interventions from teachers. In contrast, Green School always encouraged students' participation in school activities and left them significant autonomy to make decisions, whereas teachers played advising and supporting roles only. During Observation #5, for example, students and teachers had an

open discussion to brainstorm ideas. Students were very confident in expressing their ideas, and they were key actors in planning and organizing. When there were different views, teachers patiently listened to students' ideas, and then both sides thoroughly discussed them to find the most reasonable solution (O. 15: 166-187). This data was quoted when a student suggested printing invitation letters to send to students for the 18th birthday party.

Teacher 1: I think the invitation letter is unnecessary. If you want to keep good memories, I think good memories will always be kept in your mind. Students might throw the invitation letters away, and cleaners have more work to do.

Teachers 2: Yes, you might know that in previous years, many students threw the invitation letter away. There was a large amount of trash after that party. If you want to keep memories, you can design a huge backdrop for a photo shoot. I don't think that many people want to save that invitation letter after the party. Your expectation is meaningful, but the consequence might be adverse. Last year, we sent invitation letters to Grade 12 students [who are 18 years old] and thus, the other students of Grade 10 and 11 could not join. But this year we're holding a party for all students; thus, the invitation letter does not work as an entrance ticket anymore.

Student: I still want to print the invitation letter as a way to control who can come. Otherwise, people we don't know might also join the party.

Teacher 3: I think we should pay more attention to the program. The invitation letter is just the cover. It is unnecessary.

Students: My friends might think that it is interesting, today we are the most important people, we have invitation letters, and we are honored. They would have the sense that they are different from other younger students.

Teacher 2: It is your opinion, but other students might not think so.

Teacher 3: Thank you. I think most students take photos to save memories. We all know that this party is only for you. We all know that you are the most important people in the party. I think you should take it easy (O. 15: 166-187).

After a lengthy discussion, the student cannot persuade teachers to print invitation letters. In this situation, it was hard to conclude whether teachers imposed their decisions or not, and which decision was better. Nevertheless, the critical point was the way that they discussed this with the student. They did not fiercely intervene in students' plans as in a student-teacher relationship, but they gave arguments to convince the student. The attitude and behavior of these teachers, which might be somewhat different from those in regular public schools where they maintain a hierarchical student-teacher relationship, proving that teachers in Green School respected students.

In addition, the school did not merely grant autonomy to students, but teachers always encouraged, inspired, and supported them to maximize students' capacity:

One great benefit for students is being professional in maintaining cooperative relationships. When Singaporean students visit our school, our students must plan activities. Like I ordered them, 'What is your product this time? Which value of your club are you going to show to foreign friends?' Then I made some comments like 'Hey I think this idea is great, why don't you apply it?' or 'I think this activity seems not to be appropriate.' We have eight student clubs ... This April, students of School A will visit our school. Thus, students of the science club would instruct their peers on how to make a robot. ... Or students of music clubs were spectacularly successful last year. They teach foreign students to sing and dance Trong Com [a traditional Vietnamese song].... The students of the music club conducted themselves well. It means they are professional in work, and beyond

that, they show friendliness, eagerness for learning, and responsibility (I. 26: 43-59).

In this quotation, the teacher did not show her students what they should do but stimulated students' creativity. She gave them questions like 'What is your product this time? Which value of your club are you going to show to foreign friends', then she gave comments like 'Hey I think this idea is great, why don't you apply it?' or 'I think this activity seems not to be appropriate.' This data proved that when being granted autonomy and encouragement students were able to show their capacity and work very well.

There might be several explanations for this school value. First, it could be derived from the school's education philosophy regarding student development that was found in several observations:

Today we let two lovely students introduce our school to international guests.

Whichever students can do this, we encourage them to do it. Therefore, you can see that our students can do much better than we [teachers] do. It is one education philosophy of the school. We aim to involve all students in school activities to develop their full potential and make them love the school more (O. 1: 4-10).

If you have time, I invite you to participate in our weekly school assembly meetings, which are the favorite of the students. Of course, we control their program, but we give them the opportunity to develop and grow in life (O. 5: 585-588).

Furthermore, the school considered students not as passive subjects but as active actors in the education process. One teacher reported:

Today senior students operated an orientation tour to help newbies be familiar with the school and be interested in school activities. It means that senior students undertook an educational role as teachers. Via this experience, they [senior

students] are educating themselves. In student clubs such as Passion for Science, they are indeed active participants in the educational process. There has never been a conference where students can contribute papers to the conference proceeding. Our objective is making students become participants in education and be active in the school environment (O. 26: 92-100)

These quotations showed that the school granted student autonomy to fully develop students' potential: 'what students are able to do, we encourage them to do it.' It could be explained that as Green School aimed to develop students' competencies, it must challenge students to have different learning experiences. Thus, involving students in school activities was a fantastic opportunity for students' learning. The more actively students were involved in school activities, the more experience and skills they could gain. The teacher in Observation #26 called students 'active participants in the educational process' who 'undertook the educational role as teachers.' This perspective was quite strange in regular public schools, where teachers played an authoritative role in education.

Second, student autonomy was recognized as an essential need of students that the school must respond to. As most students in Green School were brilliant and active (I. 22: 9-10; I. 24: 13-14; I. 9: 65-66; I. 16: 24; I. 4: 129-132; I. 6: 426-427), they had a strong desire for demonstrating capacities not only in learning but also in school activities. In most interviews, teachers emphasized that student autonomy was essential:

I just play the advising role. Students of the Club Administration Board and student members will do it by themselves, and they plan the agenda. I just give some comments. They are very active. We should let them be active (I. 5: 187-189)

Indeed, their work is oriented and monitored by teachers, but in most cases, they can do it by themselves. Or we just share experience or comments, but we do not get directly involved in it. Students are fond of organizing activities (I. 2: 92-94)

One teacher, who had worked in an international private school and recently moved to Green School, shared her experience:

My first year of being a homeroom teacher was a failure. Because I applied my experience in School A to this school. It was a big mistake because this school is very different. The expectations of students and parents are also different. I failed. For example, in School A, students have less pressure to learn; teachers must prepare for all activities. But in this school, students are more independent and autonomous, and they can prepare for activities by themselves. If we do not give them opportunities to prepare for activities, we fail. But the situation changed from the second year. Sometimes indulging students a lot is not good. They want to have space and opportunities to demonstrate. If we do not give them chances, we fail (I. 24: 144-123)

This quotation showed that students in Green School were very independent and needed the freedom to demonstrate their capacity. When the teacher fully covered and prepared for all tasks, students might feel unsatisfied, and thus, the teacher did not maintain a good relationship with students. The change of teachers from key actors to a guides and supporters might hint that they are much concerned with students' needs and respected them. This quotation also indicated that students in Green School enjoyed higher autonomy than that of their peers in private schools.

Third, a democratic relationship between students and teachers might be a favorable environment that facilitated student autonomy. To describe the student-teacher

relationship, interviewees tended to compare it with regular public schools where they had worked previously:

The relationship between students and teachers in this school is more democratic than that in other public secondary schools. In other schools, there is a space between students and teachers. Teachers themselves create distance from the students. However, you cannot apply that practice in this school. In a democratic context, students can actively raise questions and discuss. For instance, when I was a homeroom teacher in a previous public school, students were not close to me, and I just took care of them at a moderate level. Teachers seem to be special people that students have to respect. Although I support democracy, I always keep a certain distance from my students. But it was entirely different in this school (I. 2: 70-79)

Previously when I was in public school, teachers were quite ‘formal,’ academic and strict. When I moved to this school, I see that it is radically different. The relationship is quite open, and teachers are very friendly to students (I. 3: 313-315).

These two quotes reflected a typical situation in public secondary schools where teachers were especially respected and had a strong influence on students. There was always a distance between teachers and students because the former must maintain their status as a role models for students, and students were apprehensive about speaking out. In contrast, the democratic school environment and friendly student-teacher relationship in Green School were favorable conditions for promoting student autonomy. Accordingly, the behavior of teachers must also change to be more open and friendly to students, and the student-teacher relationship could be close.

Last, whether school autonomy was a reason for student autonomy in Green School was an issue of uncertainty. One possible explanation was that in the context of school autonomy, the school must utilize its internal resources as much as possible to save expenses and reduce workload for teachers. Therefore, students are considered enormous resources to be mobilized. However, as there is not enough evidence, this hypothesis should be considered with caution.

In short, it could be inferred from data that student autonomy in both private and public schools was limited for different reasons. As private schools fully take care of students, they do not have space to demonstrate capacity as a result. Public schools do not grant autonomy to students because of the traditional perception of the subordinate role of students in school education. Green School overcame these limitations when it granted sufficient autonomy for students through teachers playing a supporting role. Student autonomy in Green School was nurtured by the school's education philosophy, students' activeness, and a positive student-teacher relationship. However, the study did not find evidence relating to student autonomy in teaching and learning or their participation in school policy development.

Students first.

Both interview and observation data revealed that a feature of the teaching staff in Green School was a considerable commitment and dedication to students' success.

We [teachers] always want to give our best to our students (O. 1: 18-19).

The viewpoint of the school principal is teachers must do their best to care for students, especially homeroom teachers, must best illustrate this value (I. 2: 83-85).

Our school's goal, like Ms. A [school principal] said, is how to improve the quality of education and how teachers can best prepare in order for students to attain the highest result (I. 1: 268-270).

One school value is that all is for our students. In brief, every teacher can teach one subject or do one business, their subject or business must be best for the students (I. 16: 53-54).

A feature of our school is that the benefits of students and teachers are given the highest priority by the School Administration Board (I. 16: 290-291).

I always work with a principle to put children [students] first (I. 19: 313-314)

Today I expect that you [teachers] can share your difficulties or experiences with the view that our students can best perform. We must best take care and teach our Grade 12 students to help them attain the highest result (O. 3: 125-128).

My experience is how to make them [parents] understand that everything I do is for the students. Not by saying, but by doing. If I keep talking too much, students and parents might get it, but it comes across as a boast about my deeds. To make them understand, I have to do it. Generally, it takes a long time (I. 14: 199-204).

In these responses, although interviewees mentioned different terms like school values, the school's goals, the principal's viewpoint, features, working principles, all terms shared the common points of giving students the highest priority, giving students the best quality of education and the greatest care, and best preparing them to attain the highest result. The explanation for these terms could be that at first, the school principal initiated and shared this viewpoint to the teachers, and stated it as an official school goal. Then it became a daily working principle of every teacher and gradually established as a typical school value. Moreover, most of these interviewees used superlatives (highest, best) to strongly emphasize that students were considered especially essential in the

school and present a substantial determination of the school to bring the best things to students. This feature seemed to be different from traditional perception in Vietnamese culture that mostly paid attention to the authoritative and decisive role of teachers in public schools.

Research data showed that teachers in Green School did not only pay attention to student academic performance but were also concerned with students' problems, homeroom teachers especially:

When being a homeroom teacher, I always think that I have to be dedicated to students. I have to consider them as my children. But how I treat my students might be different from how I treat my children because the former is one subject of the educational process. Being a homeroom teacher requires art, how to develop students equally, how to completely convince them. Being a homeroom teacher is like being a diplomat who masters education methods and strategies. Thus, homeroom teachers must always be with students, be happy with students, be down with students, and flourish with them. If a homeroom teacher only follows procedures, like checking class attendance, monitoring their violations, he or she would fail. If students go to school late, we must investigate why they were late, what happened to them, did they have a problem on the way or did they wake up late. For each case, I gave students advice for improvement rather than decrease their score or performance. ... A homeroom teacher must love students. 'How are you today?' - 'I am sick,' 'Next time when being sick, please notify me' and then the teacher must care for the student. When students are late, I asked them why they are late. If they wake up late, I suggest some tips for waking up earlier. If their bike was broken on the way, I asked, 'did you bring enough money

to fix the bike?’ That is it. I have to investigate all possible reasons rather than punish them.

In this quotation, the interviewee shared her view of being a homeroom teacher that emphasized understanding, love, empathy, and care for students rather than monitoring and controlling. Teachers must care and love students to empathize with their mistakes on the one hand and have educational methods and strategies to help students improve on the other hand. Although other observation data showed that Green School applied a strict school discipline, this data especially highlighted the role of homeroom teachers as supportive companions for students. Observation data further illustrated this interpretation:

We pay close attention to students. If there is any problem, teachers even visit students’ families. I think it is quite rare in other schools. I went to Phung [a small district very far from the city center] to check on a student. ... It should not always require a parent meeting. Or there was a student who stole something. We must treat the situation very tenderly and thoroughly. Our goal is to educate students, not to criticize them. Everything should be start from our heart, our dedication (O. 5: 576-583).

This quotation showed that the school treated students ‘tenderly and thoroughly’. It tried to find the most appropriate way to educate students from their mistakes rather than criticize or punish them. The data also reflected the intense dedication of teachers for their students when ‘everything should be started from our heart.’ There could be other explanations for this feature. Because generally most parents had high expectations and strong beliefs in homeroom teachers, considering them second mothers or father of students in the school, teachers must respond to this need. Another reason could be that

homeroom teachers received a high bonus for their work, and their salary was strongly linked with students' feedback.

In most interviews, teachers mentioned one ultimate principle applied to the teacher-parent relationship, which was 'students first' (I. 14: 199-200; I. 19: 310-314; I. 20: 145-149). This meant that in every situation the school always tended to 'do good things for students' and 'put students' benefits first' (I. 20: 147-148). Therefore, parents became supportive of the teachers' work because they knew that teachers just wanted their children to improve (I. 19: 311-313). The following data presented another example of this school value:

When there was one student who had a low performance and had to be expelled, I invited his parents to the school and spoke words from my heart. 'It is tough for him to follow the academic program of the school. He might lose his confidence. He has other competencies, but he cannot develop in this school environment. He should experience other, appropriate schools. I have to know that student very well. I am willing to consult parents to find new schools. Even when expelling students, we have to do it for students' benefits (I. 20: 151-156)

In this situation, the teacher advised the parent to move students to other schools because the student's abilities were not suitable to the rigorous academic program of Green School. For most parents, moving their children to another school is a hard decision because they always expect that their children can study in a prestigious school like Green School. 'Even when expelling students, we have to do it for students' benefits.' If the school keeps the student, 'he might lose his confidence' and 'he cannot develop in this school environment.' In this case, if finding a new suitable school, the student would be able to be more confident and enjoy the new learning environment. In

other words, when making any decision, even decisions about expelling students, the school and teachers always considered and secured students' benefits.

Making every effort for student success.

Observation data richly illustrates how teachers dedicate themselves to students' success (O. 3). Contextually, because the national entrance university examination had changed its rules, the school organized a meeting to discuss how to best prepare for students in the coming exam. During this meeting, it was observed that the school managers and teachers contributed a number of solutions such as developing teaching and learning content, increasing teaching quality, monitoring teaching and learning activities strictly, tracking students' attendance, notifying students and parents of the learning schedule, organizing mock tests, etc. (O. 3: 62-66, 480-483). One mathematics teacher reported how he and colleagues in the mathematics group prepared for the exam:

For teachers teaching Grade 12, we have compiled learning materials to prepare for the exam since the beginning of the first semester. We observed that 30% of the test relates to knowledge from Grade 10, 11. Thus, we reviewed all the crucial points from Grade 10 to 12. We agreed that we would spend at least two weeks before the exam to consolidate all knowledge ... This strategy is applied to all teachers. Students will be given many test samples. We observed the exam last year and made similar test samples ... The school will organize two mock tests at the school level, and we also organize smaller mock tests at the class level. We give students homework, they do it, and we correct ... Now the learning material is ready (O. 3: 244-250).

The response illustrated the pressure of high-stakes exams on teachers and students as well as how they carefully prepared for it. To best support students, teachers scrutinized the exam from last year and made similar test samples, compiled learning

materials, and organized mock tests at the school level and class level. These careful preparations might show a substantial determination of Green School to improve students' performance. The following cases proved that although teaching practice posed severe challenges to teachers, they always tried their best to overcome difficulties. The history teacher shared her difficulties:

Among test subjects, a few students registered to take the history and biology tests. It is an extreme difficulty, especially for students who have just started to study these subjects. Students come from different classes. For the history subject, very few students are fond of history. They just go to a preparation course because they feel it is too hard. Teaching these students is challenging. Some students are learning A2 class [the class for students who intend to take math, physics, and chemistry in the national examination]. But for me, when being assigned a task, I always try my best (O. 3: 186-192)

In my class, eleven students come from four or five different classes and have different learning backgrounds ... I have to respond to their different needs. ... In terms of class schedule, there are only four sessions in total, but they are arranged for three different days. ... I suggest that we could teach in not only the morning but also the afternoon. I can arrange my schedule to teach in the afternoon. Even when the school arranges for me to work on Sunday, I am willing to (O. 3: 202-222).

According to this data, the teacher listed many difficulties in her teaching such as a small number of students in a class, student diversity in learning background and fondness of learning history, and shortcomings in the learning schedule arrangement. However, the teacher did not aim to complain but just shared her difficulties with colleagues and the School Administration Board to discuss feasible solutions. She

maintained that ‘when being assigned tasks, I always try my best.’ When the learning schedule was inappropriate (four sessions are arranged for three different days) which might be time-consuming for both students and teachers, she suggested the solution of teaching and learning in the afternoon and maintained that ‘I can arrange my schedule to teach in the afternoon.’ Her sentence ‘even when the school arranges for me to work on Sunday, I am willing to’ did not mean that she proposed to work on Sunday but just emphasized that she can sacrifice her day off as long as it would be less inconvenient for her students and help them focus best on learning. This teacher only proposed to work on Sunday, but in fact, another teacher often worked on Sunday. This case was revealed in one school meeting:

In these months, Mr. B has not visited his mother because he goes to school every Sunday to support students in research projects. Although we must work very hard, and ‘get high’ in only 15 minutes, we would keep working and be happy when our students are successful (O. 4: 357-361).

In this case, the teacher voluntarily spent his Sunday working with students to prepare for their research projects. These projects were awarded at the national level, and students can gain a considerable advantage in the national entrance university examination. For teachers, although they must work very hard or sacrifice their benefits, they would be happy when their students are successful.

In short, student success was the highest priority of all teachers, and they showed a strong dedication to that goal. The dedication and commitment might derive from teachers’ work motivation and their voluntary willingness. However, since this study found evidence of teacher dedication to student success on tests and exams only, it seemed that this feature was primarily affected by external factors. One underlying reason might be that when applying the performance-based pay system, students’ results were

one significant contributing factor that were directly linked to evaluating teachers' work. Therefore, teachers must try their best to support students to attain the highest test results as an indirect way to increase their performance results. Second, being a self-financed school the primary income of which comes from students' tuition fees as well as being influenced by a test-based education, the school and teachers must definitively concern themselves with students' results. The success of students would further enhance school prestige and be a positive point for attracting prospective students in the future. Therefore, it could further be argued that this feature might be detrimental in terms of exacerbating the 'teaching and learning to the test' situation and increasing teachers' stress.

No student left behind.

Although most students of Green School have excellent academic performance, there were low-performing students in several classes. The way that Green School treated these students was a good illustration of its dedication to students' success. Firstly, the school always holds a positive view of low-performing students, for instance: 'we are delighted when our students have attained good performance. But we are eager to take care of students who have low performance and have not studied hard yet' (O. 4: 539-542). In this case, the teacher might express an implication that her students' performance was low not because they have weak acquisition capacity, but they 'have not studied hard yet.' This perception was also found in observations:

I prefer calling them 'special students' rather than 'bad students.' I like to define them as 'special individuals' in classes (O. 4: 305-306).

We should not use sensitive words such as 'fail graduation exams' but 'needs to put in more effort in learning, 'test results needs to be improved,' and 'if you do not make more effort, there might be...' (O. 3: 622-625).

For the teacher in Observation #4, bad students were not are lazy, naughty, or ferocious but ‘special individuals’ who needed the special support of teachers and therefore, teachers should give more attention and take better care for them. In Observation #3, when communicating with low-performing students, she changed sensitive words which might harm their confidence to encouraging words such as ‘need more efforts in learning, ‘test results needs to be improved,’ and ‘if you do not make more effort, there might be...’. She believed that these words could stimulate students’ confidence and encourage them to make more efforts. In another case, one math teacher, who frequently worked with weak students, shared his view ‘I am not sure my class is the worst in the school, but I always believe that my students are good indeed’ (O. 3: 494-496). This response did not mean that the teacher over evaluated his students but showed his strong belief in students’ ability to improve. It also hinted that the teacher did not limit his focus to students’ low results, but was aware of his responsibility in unlocking and developing students’ potentials. In short, this data proved that teachers hold considerable respect for students and trust in students’ capacity and ability to improve.

Secondly, research data showed that supporting low-performing students was a shared responsibility of not only subject teachers or homeroom teachers but also all stakeholders of the school.

We shared a view that when students are learning behind the school gate, we are fully responsible for their study and well-being. If there is any problem, I will invite parents to the school. When discussing with parents, I keep a cooperative and respective attitude toward them. No objurgating. No negative criticism.

Because I know very well that all parents wish their children to be good students. If students are not good, adults have to work together. We should not put blame on anyone, on society, on students’ friends (I. 18: 335-342)

On the one hand, the teacher was aware of her primary responsibility in educating students ‘when students are learning behind the school gate, we are fully responsible for their study and wellbeing.’ This perspective emphasized the crucial role of school and teachers and the supporting role of parents in student education. Therefore, teachers always tried their best to treat low-performing students well – ‘we should not blame anyone.’ On the other hand, the teacher highlighted the need of school-parent cooperation in supporting low-performing students because student education was a shared responsibility. Working together, finding all possible ways to help students, and never giving up were messages repeated many times in school meetings:

We must work together and say no to ‘powerlessness.’ In our personal lives, we might be powerless sometimes, but we definitely say no to powerlessness regarding students. If you cannot do it, please call me. If I cannot do it either, I will call five more people (O. 3: 335-339)

Whenever I am at school, if students need to meet me, I am willing to. I think I can work effectively with students. You [homeroom teachers] can cooperate with me. After that meeting, I think the situation would be better. And after two meetings, if the situation is not improved, I will ask for your support. We work together. ... Thank you so much. I wish that we continue working closely, you and the School Administration Board, or you can propose your solutions to help our students attain the best results (O. 3: 634-644)

The main point is that we expect homeroom teachers, parents, and students all to be involved in this task. We must work together (O. 3: 615-617)

Homeroom teachers, subject teachers, lead teachers are co-responsible for monitoring students’ progress in weeks and months (O. 4: 162-163)

The primary thing is our solutions for working with students. When you feel powerless, please notify others, please ask your colleague ‘Hey, I am powerless with this student, how should I do it?’ ... Definitely, you have to find support and collaborations from other teachers and departments. We are definitely not powerless. We must try our best and never give up (O. 19: 476-486).

It could be seen that the principal repeated the word ‘definitely’ many times, for instance ‘we definitely say no to powerlessness regarding students,’ ‘you have to definitely find support and collaboration from other teachers, other departments, ‘we are definitely not powerless.’ It is interpreted that she showed a strong determination to help low-performing students: ‘we must try our best and never give up.’ In addition, she used the pronoun ‘we’ as a clear statement that all teachers should have the responsibility of supporting low-performing students. She particularly emphasized that teachers should find support and collaboration from colleagues to find possible solutions and she was always willing to cooperate with teachers ‘If you cannot do it, please call me. If I cannot do it either, I will call five more people’. The principal might understand that supporting low-performing students was such a challenging task that one homeroom or subject teacher could not deal with it alone, but it required the consensus and cooperation of all stakeholders. It was observed that the most time in a school meeting (Observation #3) was spent in discussion between homeroom teachers, subject teachers, school managers, and superintendents to share their experience and find solutions to help low-performing students. Moreover, it seems that there is no border between teachers or school managers, no authoritative direction from superordinate to subordinates, but ‘we work together.’ On the one hand, if teachers could not solve a severe case, they could ask for the principal’s support. On the other hand, if the principal could do neither, she would ask for others’ support, and all teachers were welcomed to contribute their solutions. Once again, the

data proved that the school and teachers would cooperate and do their best to help their low-performing students get the best result.

Observation data further illustrated that in fact, teachers often found support from their colleagues to deal with low-performing students:

In my class, I talked many times to Mr. D and Mr. H for several cases. ... I also asked Mr. L [physics teacher] to tutor my students in physics. ... I asked parents to invite a private tutor for them. I said to Mr. D [subject teacher] that if there are easy exercises, please ask them to do them. If their score was 8, please praise them to encourage them to have more motivation. I also said the same to Mr. Q [subject teacher]. If you assign them easy exercises and encourage their excitement, they might find happiness in learning and learn something. If their score stays low, they might be bored. ... I know you [subject teachers] must work very hard, but please try for them. Because my class has diverse student groups, you must work harder. For good students, you can give them more challenging exercises, but for low-performing students, please love and empathize with them to give them more excitement in learning (O. 3: 539-566)

It could be interpreted from this data that the homeroom teacher actively cooperated with subject teachers and parents to reach solutions for low-performing students. It would be hard to conclude that whether her solutions were useful, for instance, asking subject teachers to give low-performing students higher scores than their real performance merited might encourage students' excitement in learning on the one hand, as she expected, but might be also unfair to other students and cause low-performing students to be easily satisfied with their efforts. Nevertheless, the primary point was that all her work derived from her love and expectation to attract students to learning. It seemed that the teacher believed that her students would have the potential for

learning as long as teachers could find ways to exploit it. However, one could bear in mind an adverse possibility that the teacher was influenced by the ‘achievement syndrome’ and she wanted to increase her students’ performance to receive a higher teacher appraisal result.

In another case, the principal, though she was very busy, firmly committed to supporting low-performing students.

Yesterday it was reported that there is one naughty student whose father passed away. In spite of being late, I still stayed with him and talked to him. Or simply, when I read the weekly report, there is a boy who is a cousin of one school teacher ... He is not able to learn geography and is very naughty. I call Mr. H [the teacher], and ... he reported that the boy would have geography on this national graduation examination, but he knows nothing... Although I was exhausted, I suffer from a lack of sleep every day. I said, ‘The examination will be the day after tomorrow, won’t it? Okay, would you mind bringing him to me? I will guide him for a while, and he will not be scared of geography’ ... I had another appointment until 9 p.m. Thus, I taught him from 9.15 p.m. to 10.20 p.m. Then he said ‘I am no longer scared of geography, it’s too easy.’ Then after the exam, he said, ‘This is the first time that I wrote up two papers. Surely, I will not gain 2 or 3 but 5 points’ (I. 25: 250-267).

It could be seen that when calling for teachers to be dedicated to students, the principal functioned as a good role model in this field. In this case, because other teachers could not solve the problems of this student, they called for support from the principal. In spite of being very busy and tired, the principal spent time teaching a low-performing student to prepare for the next test (she must arrange an appointment in the evening because she was taking a full-time course in the daytime). She successfully inspired the

student and equipped him with some necessary skills to do tests. It is argued that although this was a rare situation and this solution cannot be applied to all low-performing students, this data was a piece of strong evidence that the principal and teachers were committed to the goal of supporting low-performing students.

Thirdly, the school gave particular attention to every low-performing student and found specific solutions for them.

We expect that we can share and apply many solutions from subject teachers and homeroom teachers. There should be no general solutions for the whole class but specific ones for individual students (O. 3: 628-631)

We should dedicate ourselves to every student rather than to all forty-two students in one class. It's too general. We expect that there is a way for us to understand every student and find specific solutions and orientation for everyone (O. 19: 480-483)

The case of this homeroom teacher could well illustrate this feature:

From the middle of the first semester, I made a list of students who get low scores ... I met all their parents. Then, after the end of the first semester, I visited their home or met their parents once again. There are ten low-performing students. ... They are ... [listing student names]. For these students, I required their parents to arrange a private tutor. Most of them have private tutors for all three subjects, 300,000 VND per session. Their parents showed strong determination, and they recognized that their children made specific progress. ... Secondly, there is some gap between private tutors and subject teachers (other teachers laugh out loud). I had to discuss with private tutors to apply our school's curriculum to match our school requirements. For example, for D [student's name], I talked with his tutor for three hours, in the first semester he got 9 in mathematics, but in the second

semester he got four only (teachers laugh loud). ... I will report to the School Administration in detail. I am very dedicated, and I agree that after this meeting, all these low-performing students and their parents have to meet the school principal (O. 3: 567-588).

In this response, the homeroom teacher listed her methods to work with low-performing students such as tracking test scores, meeting with parents, collaborating with tutors in helping students. She knew every student very well. She even knew the price of a private session or spent three hours discussing the situation with private tutors to find suitable methods for her students. Although the effectiveness of these methods, particularly private tutors, remained a subject of debate, a critical point from this case was the teacher made every effort to help her weak students attain higher performance. Other teachers laugh out loud not to mock her but to empathize with her difficulties when working with low-performing students. Another teacher recognized that the methods of this homeroom teacher are 'scarce in secondary school teachers' (O. 3: 612-613). This data showed that the teacher was very much concerned with every student and tried her best to help them.

It could be argued that although other public schools might also pay attention to low-performing students, Green School considered it a burning issue. All explanations for the above category 'Making every effort for students' success' could be applicable in this category. For teachers, since low-performing students might influence teachers' appraisal results and salary, teachers must do their best to improve these students. For the school, as its reputation had a close link to student performance, it must pay special attention to low-performing students. Green School might also be under pressure from its governing bodies that expected it to be always excellent and high performing. Another explanation could be as the number of low-performing students in Green School was fewer than that

of other public schools, it could invest more time and resources for supporting these students.

Strong Link to Parents

Both interview and observation data showed that Green School maintained harmonious cooperation with parents in educating students. First, the school valued parents as a vital financial resource to school activities:

We can also mobilize contributions from parents. Parents are willing to contribute money if they know that their children are the beneficiaries of our activities (O. 3: 408-409)

There are air conditioners contributed by parents. For example, parents are wealthy, and when air conditioners in the classroom do not work well, they can buy a new one (I. 6: 589-591)

In my class, parents also involved in co-curricular activities. Some of them are sponsors for the class (I. 24: 224-226)

A general director of a housing company sponsors most of the school infrastructure. His son had studied here and now studies in a university. But whenever the school has a need, he is willing to support us from A to Z. So we can save a lot of money (I. 29: 85-89).

This data showed that parents had made significant contributions to school activities such as equipping classroom facilities, sponsoring co-curricular activities or school infrastructure. This feature might be rooted in a tradition in which Vietnamese parents pay special attention to their children's studies and are always willing to pay for education expenditure. Contributing extra fees or making endowments was quite prevalent in most public schools in big cities, especially when the school budget was insufficient for other needs such as organizing co-curricular activities or building new

infrastructure. In this case, being a self-financed school, and the only financial source being from tuition fees, the school had to mobilize possible support from all stakeholders, especially parents. No firm research data showed whether parents' financial contribution was voluntary or not. However, one potential consequence of being aware that the school is self-financed was that should the school have financial problems, schools could take a 'shared school-parent responsibility' as an opportunity to collect money at any cost to respond to the school's needs.

Second, the school encouraged parents to contribute to the school's educational activities in many ways:

Parents in my school are excited about hosting international students. They do their best to make them [international students] feel happy and satisfied. Thus, when students returned home, they told their parents that Green School was wonderful, not only teachers, students but also parents. ... Sometimes, parents connected the school to potential partners. They know that the school pays attention to international cooperation. Therefore, if they know information somewhere, they might introduce it to us. 'There is a foreign school which is looking for a Vietnamese partner' or 'There is a foreign university which is recruiting prospective students.' It means parents are building bridges for international cooperation (I. 26: 220-230)

Or in a school meeting, the principal suggested homeroom teachers involve parents in school activities:

Why don't you [homeroom teachers] think about our parents who might be very good at arranging flowers? Please share the responsibility with our parents. Let's say to them: 'would you mind helping me in this case. I especially trust in you.

You can visit my class and instruct my students [how to arrange flowers]' (O. 3: 254-258).

The students' parents are lovely. We are very 'sensitive' in this case. It means we know who could support the school in which activities. In our school, we do not collect money from students, but we mobilize resources. In my view, they [parents] are an enormous resource that we have not fully mobilized (I. 26: 199-203).

According to this data, the school knew the strengths of students' parents and wisely mobilized their contributions. For example, in Observation #3, the school organized a flower arrangement contest, and the principal suggested that homeroom teachers should ask students' parents for help. Or parents could be a host for international students or recommend potential international partners to the school (Observation #22). This support could be more significant than any financial contribution because they proved that parents were interested in school matters, and the school-parent relationship could be strengthened.

Third, students' parents were not only a useful resource for the school but also a vital school partner for educating students. For example, parents who were experts in different fields were invited to go to the school and to provide career guidance for students. The school established a parent club, which was a rare practice in public schools, to find solutions in educating students like how to deal with teenager's problems:

In my class, parents also participate in class activities, for example, I invited parents who work in different fields to introduce their job to students, the advantages and disadvantages in their career, and then guide students in career selection (I. 24: 226-229)

We call students' parents for involvement in school activities very much. For example, in school events, parents could also be involved. They even came earlier than teachers. They came to parent clubs. We regularly organize parent clubs. ... We established parent clubs and maintained their activities. They highly appreciate it because when participating in the club, they know their children more. I could say that the school is a trustworthy address to parents. Students can share their personal stories with us, from their love to family matters. Then we discussed it with parents. Parents thanks us because they feel it is difficult to educate their children. I think this feature is valuable in the school-parent relationship (O. 5: 565-575).

These quotations showed that the school highly valued the role of parents and actively created opportunities to involve parents in educating students. This feature might be different from other (public and private) secondary schools which have no tradition of involving parents in student education. Due to the long-established perception of the authoritative role of teachers in educating students and absolute trust in school education – ‘There is nothing better than our teachers’ (O. 13: 210), parents did not want and did not know how to get involved in school education. In addition, most schools had no effective measures to attract parents in school activities as well as involve them in student education.

Fourth, research data further revealed parent participation in some areas of school practice. On the one hand, parents can have a remarkable influence on teaching and learning activities.

We are making student performance reports for this semester to send to parents. Parents could give recommendations or suggestions in parent meetings, and then we collect all the ideas. They can voice ideas about teaching and learning, co-

curricular activities, experimental learning. They can surely voice their opinions (I. 29: 52-56).

This response showed that the school maintained its accountability in teaching and learning via regular reports on student performance. It also gave parents many opportunities to have an influence on education issues to improve education quality. Observation data further illustrated this idea. Observation #13, for example, was a parent meeting where all parents could feel free to give their opinions. A lead of the parent group concluded:

I have an idea that I will collect all your comments and ideas, then I will discuss it with school managers. We have ideas here. ... This is our request; the school must have the responsibility to meet us. Students are also the school's children (O. 13: 209-212).

This data was quoted from a parent meeting where there were only parent representatives present to discuss problems relating to teaching and learning. All ideas and comments were collected, and then one representative discussed them with school managers. It proved that parents could have a powerful voice to influence teaching and learning because they were the primary source of the school budget - 'This is our request, the school must have the responsibility to meet us.'

In contrast, parents seem to have low participation in school finance:

In terms of finance, we are not connected to parents. Because the school does not recruit a third party to organize school activities, we have never called for parents' money. We collect tuition fees only and nothing more, so we don't have to be accountable for anything. ... We are a public self-financed school, and the only thing is state auditing (I. 29: 48-52)

This interviewee maintained that because the school collected tuition fees to cover educational expenditure, it held no financial accountability to parents but to governing bodies only. It could be seen that school autonomy did not make any change to school accountability in finance to parents. This perception and practice could be understandable in Vietnam, where public schools were under strict administration and control of governing bodies in most areas, and parents have no opportunities (and ability) to get involved. Therefore, Green School had no pressure of being accountable to parents. There was no research data regarding the influence of parents on other school issues such as personnel management or strategic planning.

Learning Organization

Motivations for learning.

Research data revealed that teachers had different motivations for getting involved in professional development. Three main motivations were a personal passion, the influence of external forces, and students' needs.

Personal passion. At first, learning was a passion and a need for teachers per se. One salient feature of teachers in Green School was an eagerness for learning (I. 6: 198-199; I. 7: 31; I. 13: 204; I. 16: 56-59; I. 18: 220). Teachers considered their learning, not as a required task but an essential daily activity: 'teaching means to learn' (I. 9: 20). It means the interviewee was fully aware that teaching and learning are two inseparable tasks of teachers. Another young teacher supports this idea: 'I think that I am here [Green School] not only to teach but also to learn a lot' (I. 24: 36-37). In this sentence, the teacher might show her modesty on the one hand, and she emphasized the significance of learning and professional development to her work on the other hand. 'We gradually accumulate simple things from daily activities' (I. 17: 142-143). It means she considered daily activities of school practice as favorable opportunities to learn and develop herself

professionally. For those who were at the early stage of their teaching career, they actively observe other senior teachers to obtain teaching experience and classroom management abilities (I. 13: 47-52; I. 14: 19-22). One young math teacher shared his efforts (I: 9: 68-74):

I observe all subjects, even chemistry, geography, and literature. It is not required.

I just approach those who are good at teaching methods. They feel comfortable when being observed. I also observed with student teachers. I even observed English lessons in spite of being bad at English.

It should be remembered that this form of teaching observation was voluntary and was not taken into account in the appraisal results. However, the young teacher devoted significant time and effort to observe senior colleagues and even student teachers in most subjects to get diverse teaching experience and improve his professionalism. More noticeably, not only young teachers were interested in professional development but also senior teachers. For example, one old teacher actively applied new things learned from training courses to his teaching and learning practice and then shared his experience with the juniors. He described it thus:

After participating in training courses or conferences, whether it is required or not,

I always apply a new approach to my class. No need to call for or tell anyone.

When you try to apply it, you would know it very well before sharing for others.

You will realize the pros and cons of the approach and what should be improved.

If you just learn and do not test it out, the knowledge just stays in your head. I just do my best to keep up with the young. We should apply knowledge to see the gap between theory and practice (I. 11: 50-57).

This response indicated that learning was voluntary to the old teacher. He did not need to prove to anyone that he was learning but he just ‘[did his] best to keep up with the

young.’ On the one hand, learning was a happy or a need per se when he was interested in experimenting with new approaches to teaching and learning practice ‘to see the gap between theory and practice.’ From one perspective, he might have wanted to become a trustworthy source of expertise in new areas, so he preferred investigating knowledge thoroughly before sharing it with colleagues. In another case of Interviewee 23: 86-107, one senior teacher had a strong motivation to learn, and she did not hesitate to ask and to learn from junior colleagues. When the school equipped all classrooms with projectors, she wished to make innovations in teaching and learning methods and apply information technology to teaching. She learned from young teachers how to design e-learning lessons. ‘They instructed me carefully and concretely; thus, now I can master computer skills and deal with errors when using a computer’ (I. 23: 99-102). She recognized her weakness and did not shy away from it. This showed that age and self-esteem were not barriers to the senior teacher to learn new things. One junior teacher shared her observation:

I see that they [senior teachers] always learn. When knowing their work, I am quite ashamed of myself and hugely admire them. Despite being old, they are very passionate about learning and renewal. I wonder why they are in their forties but very interested in creating new inter-subject learning topics (I. 6: 202-207)

Similarly, Interviewee 22: 48 commented that senior teachers inspired him a lot to remake and renew his teaching and learning plans. These responses showed that senior teachers were good examples of learning to continuously update their knowledge as well as improve teaching and learning practices. Notably, in the context of Confucian heritage culture that shows great honor to seniors, their efforts to learn were a significantly positive inspiration and influence on junior teachers.

External forces. Research data showed that recent changes in school practice such as performance-based pay, school-based curriculum development were both pressure and momentum for teachers to get involved in professional development activities. For instance, the introduction of a performance-based pay mechanism in Green School required teachers to learn and update new knowledge continuously. Many key indicators of teacher appraisal system referred to teachers' learning, such as attendance in professional development activities.

Our school is different from others. Teacher appraisal directly links to his or her students, working performance and responsibility but no expedient nor smarm nor anything else. If you show your efforts to learn, you will obtain absolute success sooner or later. Thus, every teacher has to try more and more. Whoever (I. 17: 137-142).

In recent years, teachers have to learn with a vengeance. Otherwise, they could be dismissed. It is definite. In this school, we [teachers] have to protect our image with parents, students, and coworkers. Otherwise, we will be 'dead.' You have to understand that you can work in this position today or you can work well this year. But. It is a fact (I. 7: 148-152)'

According to the data, teachers' learning in Green School was not optional but compulsory if they wanted to maintain their work. As the performance-based pay reflected teachers' performance and efforts, 'if you did not improve yourself, you would be 'dead' the next year.' This response presented the pressure of professional development on teachers on the one hand, and the severity of working in a competitive environment like Green School on the other hand.

The following data further illustrated that school changes had massive impacts on teacher professional development. One interviewee observed a change in senior teachers:

Old teachers are now the most active people in remaking testing and evaluation and updating new teaching and learning methods. Three years ago, there was a big gap between old teachers who were going to be retired and their students in terms of perspective, teaching method, and education approach. Two recent years onward, they have gradually adapted to the new requirements, and now they can perform very well (I. 3: 3: 84-89).

This response hinted that recent changes in Green School, such as school-based curriculum development and performance-based pay might be a significant momentum to encourage senior teachers to learn. For example, a school-based curriculum might be an opportunity for senior teachers to demonstrate their expertise and take a vital role in the curriculum development process. In addition, when experiencing new practices in teaching and learning via training courses, teaching observation, or colleagues' sharing, senior teachers might realize a need for changing, and they learned not to lag. Another explanation might be that rigid rules of performance-based pay led to the exit of many unqualified senior teachers; the remaining ones were the most excellent and hard working. Since the performance-based pay system is based on competencies and performance instead of years of working experience, senior teachers recognized that they might be evaluated lower than junior colleagues or even be dismissed if they did not try. Thus, these senior teachers got involved in learning as a way to stay updated on the educational innovations of the school and to respond to the teacher appraisal system.

To meet students' needs. An investigation of research data revealed that students were the most important reason and motivation for teachers to keep learning and trying. One chemistry teacher explained his learning motivation that 'my students are very good at English but very bad at chemistry. Thus, I organize games in English to make lessons more attractive' (I. 22: 74-79). He expected to improve both his professional knowledge

and English proficiency to be more confident with students (I. 22: 167). In this case, the teacher based his learning objective on students' features. He tried learning English 'to make lessons more attractive' to students. It could be seen that he was interested in students' experiences and considered meeting students' needs as a goal of his learning. Similarly, English teachers shared that:

Because my students are excellent, I must investigate not only the textbook but also many references (I. 13: 244-247).

Now teaching and learning no longer applies the traditional approach. Our students do not merely study to do the test, but they have other needs. If teachers are not good enough, just a bit of unpersuasive advice, they cannot convince their students ... For English teachers, there is the difficulty that students now can study English via many sources such as the Internet, native speakers, English centers. If teachers are not good enough, it is such a bad thing. Thus, the first requirement for Green School teachers is to keep learning. Otherwise, teachers would lag behind. That is society's demand. It's life now. It is unacceptable if teachers do not meet students' demands (I. 17: 153-164).

According to this data, teachers recognized that students were a crucial motivation for their learning. First, students have increasingly higher expectations of teachers. They 'do not merely study to do the test, but they have other needs.' Thus, teachers had to understand students' needs and keep learning to meet these needs. Second, on the one hand, due to the influence of Confucian heritage culture, students tended to put high trust and expectations in their teachers as an authoritative source of knowledge. On the other hand, students were excellent, and they had many opportunities to access other sources of learning English outside classrooms. For both reasons, teachers were under the enormous pressure to prove their competencies to students because 'if

teachers are not good enough, they cannot convince their students'. Another explanation, which was not mentioned in data, might be that when students become one principal evaluator of the teacher appraisal system, teachers must learn to improve their professional abilities to get good feedback from students. In short, teachers learned and developed professionally not only to improve their knowledge or to prove their competencies but also to meet students' diverse expectations.

For senior teachers, their investigation also aimed to improve students' learning but with a different focus. One old math teacher, Interviewee 12: 95-98, reported that he regularly read many mathematical journals, materials, and books to prepare for coming changes in student testing and evaluation. Similarly, in one observation, a junior teacher introduced his senior colleague 'In my group, Mr. T is the only senior teacher. There have been many abrupt changes, but he can even stay updated quicker than the juniors' (O. 12: 84-86). It could be seen that for senior teachers like Interviewee #12 and Mr. T, they paid particular attention to investigating and staying updated on new practices in testing and examination. The self-learning practice of these senior teachers might be detrimental in terms of aggravating 'teaching to the test' situation and discouraging innovative ideas in teaching and learning. However, on a positive side, they made considerable efforts to meet a fundamental need of students. This practice might be attributed to the fact that because most senior teachers have been familiar with long-established 'teaching to the test' culture, their main concern was how to best prepare students for tests and examination rather than how to apply innovative approaches in teaching and learning. In addition, because these senior teachers were assigned to teach Grade 12 students, who are taking the national examination, teachers' learning must explicitly link to the need of students to get good marks on the examination.

Teachers' need-based training.

Teachers in Green School might have many opportunities to participate in training courses of governing bodies from the central to the local level (I. 18: 281-282; I. 2: 131-133; I. 14: 93-94; I. 24: 32-33). However, the most effective form of teacher training which emerged from research data was training programs organized in the school. First, it is observed that in the context of school autonomy, teacher professional development activities have a secure link to the school's development strategy. For instance, the principal shared (I. 25: 304-311):

I support all teachers who want to study. Ms. H is studying abroad. In 2018, the school will introduce an international class. I am interested in teaching English to teachers, for instance, Mr. C, Ms. Q, Ms. H are Ph.D.s in Mathematics, Ms. H, holds just a master's degree but is very good at English. I am contacting I [one English center] to arrange an appropriate English course for them, and the school will provide funding. Because the school budget is available, and I have a good economic strategy. I manage the budget, so I am willing to cover those expenses. I support learning. If we want to develop, we must learn.

This response might indicate that teacher professional development received great support from the school leader because it was a key measure to realize school strategy. To prepare for the introduction of an international class, the school had many activities such as teaching English to teachers or support teachers to obtain higher degrees. Similarly, since the school has aimed at the competency-based approach, it encouraged teacher groups to organize training sessions to realize this goal (O. 6, 12, 18). These practices might indicate that enjoying autonomy in finance and having substantial financial resources, the school can allocate generous funding to professional development activities to successfully implement school strategies.

Second, teacher professional development was based on teachers' needs and capacities. Instead of applying a top-down approach in professional development, Green School granted autonomy to professional groups to organize most training activities at the professional group level. Lead teachers can propose the idea of a training topic according to teachers' needs and invite an expert who might help teachers deal with current problems (O. 3: 46-47; O. 12: 28-35). The school manager regularly encouraged and supported teacher training in professional groups, as long as they submitted a concrete and persuasive proposal (O. 12: 23-27). This decentralization to professional group level might improve training effectiveness because teachers know very well the advantages and problems when teaching one specific subject (O. 12: 66-68). Interviewee #5 argued that training at the group level was more effective than that at the school level because 'if there is only one speaker, he or she cannot cover many audiences and it is unsure if all teachers can obtain the training content' (I. 5: 204-206). In contrast, small-scale training sessions at the group level can concentrate on specific problems of the teacher group. For instance, the English teacher group invited native English teachers to train on evaluating student tests, organizing learning activities (I. 13: 247-249) while mathematics, physics, and chemistry groups invited experts in competency-based assessment (O. 6, 12, 18). Interviewee #24 compared this with her experience working in a private school, where she said she had never been involved in training courses organized by school (I. 24: 32-35). To further highlight the advantage of school-based training in Green School, one teacher described the current situation of teacher training in other public schools (O. 12: 233-245). Generally, most public schools maintained a top-down training model in which education managers of higher governing bodies were first participants, and then they would train education managers of lower governing bodies, and schoolteachers were the final trainees. This training model led to a situation of 'a tale never loses the telling' (O.

12: 243) and teachers, who would be directly involved in realizing innovation in schools, had no clear idea about implementation. Other interview data further emphasized this distinction:

Other public secondary schools do not organize training by themselves. Their teachers just participate in programs offered by DoET. Whereas in my school, training is based on teachers' needs. We invite experts to deal with the specific problems that we encountered in practice (I. 3: 309-312).

Our school is very close to a pedagogical university and education experts. The principal frequently invites experts; especially those who have experience in education reform, for instance, Mr. B last week. We have training sessions on developing a matrix test. It is a significant advantage because most provinces have to wait for summer training courses. Then only one or two teachers have opportunities to participate in training courses led by experts (I. 5: 26-31).

Observation data, in which most training programs of Green Schools were led by leading experts from pedagogical universities to deal with particular topics, further proved this statement. In another case, the principal set the target of developing capacity for scientific research among schoolteachers. Thanks to a close relationship with the pedagogical university, she was able to invite many experts from academia to train and support teachers.

I invited the chief of an education journal, university lecturers, and scientists who daily work in academia to train teachers in science action research. Training is not just one presentation session on how to write an article. If one teacher wrote an article, I connected him or her to a university lecturer who has written many articles. Then they can learn mutually (I. 25: 332-336).

It is suggested that because of being a self-financed school and piloting the school-based curriculum, Green School had to face different problems and needs from those of other public schools. Therefore, it tends to implement professional development activities to respond to the school's specific needs rather than be involved in a general training program offered by DoET. Thanks to applying a distinct model of teacher training, teachers were the biggest beneficiaries because they could have opportunities to be trained by experts and access the latest education changes. When training topics focused on the teachers' specific needs, they could be, in a timely way, in dealing with current problems in teaching and learning practice as well as adapting to education changes.

Good mentors everywhere.

In most interviews, teachers particularly highlighted the support of colleagues in their professional development. The practice of teaching observation might be a good example. Teaching observation was the most popular form of learning between teachers at the group level and required of all teachers (I. 5: 35-36). Every academic year, teaching might be observed many times by colleagues or student teachers. There were always feedback sessions after every observation (I. 5: 118-119). Interviewee 14: 76-80 recognized that although preparing for one teaching observation session was very strenuous, it helped her get experience. Reflections from colleagues helped teachers improve teaching and learning practice (I. 9: 27-33; I. 24. 232-235). Interviewee 19: 28-42 shared her experience to emphasize that feedback from colleagues after every teaching observation is 'more valuable than two years of studying for a master's degree' (40-42). One teacher shared her story:

I taught many times. I taught, and my colleagues observed and reflected. I made improvements and taught one more time, and then colleagues continued observing

and reflecting. For instance, they corrected my tone, when to raise or soften the tone, when I should speak fast or slow to attract students' attention. They showed me how to organize stages of a teaching period, how to put questions according to the students' capacity. I had known this theoretical knowledge beforehand, but it seemed to be very vague in practice. But thanks to conducting exercises, I am very familiar with it now (I. 14: 82-88)

This data showed that this teacher highly appreciated her colleagues' support during the early stage of her teaching career. Colleagues voluntarily shared their teaching experience and gave detailed advice on how to sharpen one's teaching skills. This support helped her make progress and gain experience. One positive feature of teacher professional development in Green School was that teaching observation did not aim to judge teacher teaching, but it put a strong emphasis on the learning of students. To be more specific, the traditional form of teaching observation, which focused on observing teachers' teaching was replaced with 'lesson study' (I. 5: 119-125; I. 7: 80-82). First, all teachers in a professional group discussed the formulation of a teaching plan. Then, one teacher was selected to perform a teaching period. During that teaching and learning period, instead of observing and judging teachers, colleagues paid more attention to students' learning and their responses to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. Next, in reflection sessions, teachers contributed their ideas to improve teaching and learning. The process of preparation – exercise – reflection might be repeated until attaining the best teaching plan. Under the form of a lesson plan, both observed teachers and observers could get more experience in teaching and learning practice (I. 23: 133-134). 'We can realize how students respond to the lesson organization of the teacher, are they excited with questions or learning activities,' she explained (I. 23: 136-138).

In summary, teaching observation, which is a vital tool of peer review in the appraisal system, was also an effective form of teacher professional development in Green School. It could create a positive impact on teachers' work when there is an environment that encourages frank and constructive reflection. As a result, teachers can feel free to contribute comments to their colleagues as well as receive comments from others to improve their performance. In addition, teaching observation would be more effective when it does not concentrate on checking how teachers teach but observing how students react to the lesson and attain learning objectives. Post-reflection is a favorable opportunity for all participants to analyze lesson plans and carry out improvements. Good or bad practices recognized from teaching observation should be widely shared to make progress in teaching and learning.

Next, research data showed one noticeable feature of teachers in Green School was eagerness to learn new things from others. 'We learn from our friends, from colleagues and students. We learn every time' (I. 16: 57-58) because 'anyone could be your mentor' (I. 5: 199). Firstly, Green School teachers considered colleagues a valuable and easily accessible source of knowledge and experiences that can be learned. Discussing an issue with a colleague might be the fastest and most convenient way to improve professional knowledge (I. 5: 192-195; I. 9: 7) when teachers can easily connect with their colleagues to receive the necessary support. Interviewee 13: 218-229 reported that she could share her problems with anyone and anywhere to get useful advice, for instance, 'Whenever I'm in the teacher lounge, I can share my problems, and others recommend solutions.' Similarly, Interviewee 14: 52-54 reflected that 'I ask my colleagues whenever I encounter problems. They help me whole-heartedly' (I. 14: 52-54). Interviewee 9: 15-17 and Interviewee 1: 278-280 felt very lucky to be instructed by senior colleagues in such a comfortable way. Teachers reported always being timely supported

by colleagues whenever having difficulties or problems (I. 5: 198-199; I. 9: 53-56; I. 14: 51-54). Advice and support from colleagues might be in terms of teaching experience, communication skills (I. 1: 256-258; I. 10: 140-143; I. 21: 34-38) or class management (I. 9: 20-24; I. 16: 61-66). Interviewee 13: 42-47 shared that:

I frequently ask them [senior teachers], for instance, how should I teach these students, how should I react to certain class situations. I just describe my situation, and then they will advise me how to solve it. For example, if students are lazy, they suggest that I should increase the difficulty of the pre-test to make them understand that learning is necessary. They advise me enthusiastically.

Secondly, teachers recognized that all colleagues regardless of age, years of working experience, or subject areas, are good examples that they can learn from. 'Every generation of teachers give us useful lessons' (I. 19: 67-68). Interviewee 19: 45-99 made a very concrete example of learning between four generations of teachers in her professional group. Each generation has certain advantages and disadvantages, which would be useful for learning. For older teachers who are in their fifties, they are very experienced in knowledge and pedagogical methods whereas they are not able to revamp their lessons with modern technology. For those who are in their forties, they are very good at theoretical background and scientific methodology. For those who are in their thirties, in spite of having a lack of theoretical background, they are very enthusiastic in working and eager to learn new things. Finally, young teachers at the age of twenty could have boundless energy and dedication to work. Being inexperienced, they might have some faults. However, Interviewee 19: 65-67 considered those faults as good lessons for herself because 'I realized that I had done things wrong when I was young also; thus I have to try not to have that fault now.'

Another practice of learning from others could be found in the physics teacher group, for instance:

In my group, I assign work according to the strengths of each member. If one is good in a specific area, he or she would be a key person and others might play a supporting role. The key person is mainly responsible for work in that area. This measure can develop teacher professionalism because they can learn from each other. It is a critical point (I. 3: 148-151).

In this case, the lead teacher of the physics group assigned tasks according to the pros and cons of teachers. When one teacher became a key person in certain areas, he or she can best demonstrate their competencies, and other teachers can learn from that expert. This practice might be an effective strategy to encourage teachers to show their unique strengths and then form an active teacher group.

Besides learning from colleagues, teachers of Green School also learn from student teachers and even students. Thanks to the features related to its being a laboratory school, teachers of Green School have to work with many student teachers. One teacher admitted that she learned many things from student teachers because they are very active and creative (O. 14: 283-288). Interviewee 16: 167-173 reported that when instructing student teachers, she also learns from them to keep up with new trends in practice. Interviewee 23: 27-30 was instructed by students to prepare for an English test. Interviewee 3: 91-101 reported that instructing student teachers is also a way of professional development when the teacher regularly has to stay updated regarding the latest trends in pedagogy.

As one task of teachers is model teaching for student teachers, teachers must study. If the school merely encourages teachers to study, it might be unfeasible. But this is our official task. Every year, we must model four sessions for student

teachers. To produce those four sessions, we must try to bridge the gap between students' prior knowledge acquired from academia and teaching practice.

Therefore, teachers are required to develop their lessons. You know, if secondary school teachers do not regularly stay updated, they might easily think inside the box. Then student teachers cannot learn anything from us. They might think that what they learned in the university does not match teaching practice in secondary school.

In short, the support and sharing between teachers created a strong learning community where every teacher was both an active learner and a mentor of others. The growth of the learning community nurtured a school value of sharing. On the one hand, teachers were willing to learn from anyone because all the strengths and weaknesses of teachers might be a treasured source of expertise and experience for others. On the other hand, they were willing to support their colleagues because they considered sharing and helping as a general school value.

Cooperation for learning.

It was observed that the school took advantage of every cooperative relationship to promote learning opportunities for teachers and students. This feature was presented in all relationships between the school and other public secondary schools, universities, and foreign secondary schools. This section only highlights Green School's cooperation that links to the purpose of learning and teacher professional development. The relationship between the school and its governing university is not mentioned here because it reflects a typical feature of the laboratory school and does not much relate to school autonomy.

Learning is the primary purpose of cooperation. An investigation of data revealed that Green School considered cooperation as a strategy to promote learning and to share good practices. For instance, Green School developed many fruitful relationships

with foreign secondary schools in Singapore, Japan, Sweden, and New Zealand (I. 26: 9-14). Interviewee 17: 25-29 explained that previously, the initial purpose of international cooperation activities was merely to introduce the school to foreign schools. However, since the new principal took over, learning was set as the ultimate goal of international cooperation. The principal clearly stated that ‘We can learn something from foreign schools from good education systems’ (O. 1: 14-15) and ‘we would like to learn from you [foreign school] to organize education activities better’ (O. 1: 19-20). In other words, Green School showed a strong determination regarding learning from their foreign partners. Interviewees listed several reasons underlying special attention to international cooperation. First, ‘Vietnam is a developing country where knowledge and management capacity is weak’ (I. 26: 5-6). Due to the requirement of global integration, ‘if we do not cooperate with foreign partners and know ourselves only, we would be outdated’ (I. 17: 33-34). It is also derived from the need of both teachers and students to have exchanges with the international community (I. 17: 34-35).

This ultimate purpose of learning has had an influence on the cooperation strategy of Green School. It is observed that Green School tends to find cooperative opportunities with schools that share similar features or strategies. For example, it had a tight relationship with School P. because this school also enjoys similar school autonomy in curriculum development, finance, and human resource management. ‘When organizing training courses, we invite School P. to participate, and vice versa’ (I. 26: 282-283). Similarly, the school maintained a good relationship with School N. because it has great strength in developing international cooperation and with Schools N.H, T.P, L. because these schools pay special attention to co-curricular activities (I. 26: 289-294). Similarly, for foreign partners, as the school set a clear objective of ‘what can we learn from your [foreign] school?’ (I. 26: 26-27), it deliberately selects partners that share similar values

or development strategies, for instance ‘school A. and M. have strength in scientific research, school R. has strength in student clubs, and school S. is interested in community service, voluntary activities, and global citizen development’ (I. 26: 27-33). According to Interviewee #26, thanks to this cooperation, Green School learned a lot from its school partners. It could be seen that co-curricular activities of Green School such as student clubs, student community service, scientific research, which was quite strange to most Vietnamese public secondary schools, were inspired by foreign partners.

Learning from good practices. Interview data proved that school-to-school cooperation made significant improvements to school education practice when Green School tended to learn and adopt good practice from its school partners. For example:

I can learn a lot from them [other schools] because they are all excellent people. I learn their good practices and then attempt whether our school can apply them or not. Experiences in school management. Experience in implementing teaching and learning activities. Experience in organizing educational activities, experimental activities, and sports activities. ... When I visited School N.T.P, at first, I admired their facilities for teaching and learning. They have a sports area, many subject rooms. Their area is 32,000 m², while my school is 4,000 m² only. Their schools are eight times larger than mine are. We also learn sports, but we organize according to our capacity. I saw that the school was very interested in co-curricular activities (I. 26: 315-325)

It could be seen that the principal considered school partners as a useful source of experience in school management. In this example, being inspired by a partner, Green School tried to introduce a new physical education program and offer a wide variety of sports activities. In addition, Green School especially benefitted from international cooperation. Teachers reflected that cooperative activities with foreign partners made

massive changes in their teaching and learning. The most apparent gain was teachers had the opportunity to be trained by expert teachers of school partners or international organizations (I. 26: 108-109, 113-114, 127; O. 1: 21-26). Interviewee 24 added that international cooperation activities helped teachers get more experience in working with students and improve student-teacher relationships (I. 24: 51-52). In addition, teachers can adapt to experience observed from foreign schools to their teaching practice. For Interviewee #17, she was highly excited to share teaching experience gained from her visit to a Singapore school:

They [teachers of foreign schools] have never made negative comments to students. All comments and reflections are positive. If students cannot do an exercise, teachers will encourage them. I have learned a lot about student encouragement strategies. For example, if a weak student achieves a small success, teachers would not only praise him or her but also give congratulations. Whether students' answer is true or false, teachers would never say that 'you are wrong' but rather, 'Thank you. Do you have any other ideas?' I realized that the way that we [teachers] communicate and encourage students is very important (I. 17: 62-69).

This data should be interpreted in a cultural context. Traditionally, teachers play a central role in teaching and learning. Their main target is to transmit knowledge to students as much as possible, whereas student emotion is less paid attention to. Moreover, as teaching and learning do not apply a constructive approach, students are not encouraged to think differently from teachers and textbooks that are the primary source of knowledge. Therefore, when observing teaching and learning practice in Singapore, she changed her teaching towards more encouraging of students' engagement and nurturing their positive emotions. Interestingly, the practice under which teachers encourage

learning motivation of weak students could be further observed in other classes (O. 3: 558-562). It seems that when teachers have a strong learning motivation from foreign partners, they can learn from minor good practice and then gradually make meaningful changes in teaching and learning.

Interviewee #17 further described another change in terms of group learning strategies. Previously, the teacher used to equip students with all the necessary knowledge and then assign exercises to student teams. Thanks to a visit to Singapore school, she changed her approach to encouraging students' pro-activeness and curiosity in learning:

Now students are responsible for preparing for one lesson. They have to study textbooks and references. I encourage them to explore as much as possible. Then groups could present their results to all students or exchange their results with other groups. Next, I ask them what they learned today, how they feel about the lesson, do they feel happy and comfortable. Finally, I conclude the lesson by introducing some key points to be filled out by students. Teachers must work harder at home while they play a guiding role in the class (I. 7: 74-85).

It could be seen that there was a marked improvement from the teacher-centered to a student-centered approach. Students had more opportunities to actively explore knowledge by themselves and improve their learning skills, such as reading, group work, and presentation skills. Instead of transmitting a large amount of knowledge to students, the teacher mainly played a guiding, supporting, and encouraging role in the class. With this approach, her work became harder when she had to invest more time and energy for planning a variety of learning activities instead of using lecturing and questioning techniques as was done previously. However, the teacher did not feel tired or bored, but was very excited to share her changes. Particularly, besides paying attention to knowledge objectives 'what do they [students] learn today,' she turned attention to students'

emotions ‘how they feel about the lesson, do they feel happy and comfortable.’ This practice marked a radical change in the teachers’ perspective in comparison with the traditional teacher-center approach.

In another case, after participating in an in-service training course in Indonesia, Interviewee 24: 49-52 told that she got valuable experience in differentiated instruction²³, applying information technology in mathematics, and problem-based teaching and learning. She compared differences in teaching and learning approaches:

In Vietnam, we start with academic concepts and definitions and then conduct practice exercises. But I realized that other countries apply a different approach when they start with problems relating to life, and then they introduce concepts and definitions. Next, they will use new knowledge to solve the problem, and finally, exercises are introduced to consolidate the concepts. Mathematics knowledge in their schools [foreign schools] is not too difficult and does not make students feel scared (I. 24: 64-69).

Thanks to being involved in training courses with foreign experts and observing education practice in foreign schools, the teacher could have an idea of different approaches in teaching and learning. She had realized the pros and cons of approaches, and adapted the most appropriate one to improve her teaching. The data showed that she favored an approach linking math knowledge with life and inspiring a love of math to students. It could be seen that students’ emotions, once again, become one issue of concern to the teacher.

Interviewee 26: 85-92 shared a story of her colleague:

²³ Differentiated instruction is an educational philosophy based on the belief that students are different according to personal interests, learning styles, and levels of readiness; therefore, teachers should plan for, develop, and adjust instruction and assessment according to student variance (Rich & Gajda, 2006)

When coming back from a visit to Singapore schools, she was so ‘shocked’ and excited. She told everyone: ‘oh my God, they [Singaporean teachers] are so professional and dedicated to students. When I asked them, ‘Do you get a bonus for this tutor session?’ They said, ‘No, I do not. They are students in my class. Because they are too weak, I have to tutor them because the semester test is coming. If their test results are too low, I might get a lower salary. No one pays for my work today’. It means that they are very enthusiastic and professional’.

Although there was no firm evidence, it could be suggested that when teachers had the opportunity to observe positive values from international practice, they would share and inspire those values in other teachers and students. And then, these values might be gradually adapted and cherished in Green School.

Furthermore, thanks to being involved in school-to-school cooperation, teachers and students could get more experience in organizing international cooperation activities. They try to show their professional, friendliness, eagerness for learning to make positive impressions on foreign friends and partners (I. 26: 58-63). ‘We are gradually professional’ (I. 17: 105-106). All plans are devised carefully to ensure every activity is implemented smoothly (I. 26: 187-197). Students also are actively involved in organizing international cooperation activities (I. 26: 43-58). For example, student clubs were responsible for planning activities to introduce to international students, for instance, science club members instructed their peers how to design a robot, music club members teach their peers to sing and dance Vietnamese traditional songs. ‘The school R. highly appreciated wonderful activities that we had organized for their students’ (O. 1: 28-29). Besides, these activities have diversified co-curricular activities in the school and made considerable contributions to develop student autonomy and confidence.

Next, international cooperation became one learning motivation for teachers when they had to learn English and improve their professionalism to be involved in activities.

Some teachers showed adverse reactions. Some teachers are under a lot of stress. Even English teachers, sixteen people. Some of them fled when they saw the school principal was talking with a foreigner because they are afraid of speaking English. ... But now most of them, even the one who ran far away, had to register for English courses. They have to learn English and be more active in communication. Then they are more experienced. It's a positive gain. Now they have to learn outside English centers. We also invited English teachers to teach our teachers. They even offered free courses. For example, when foreign partners contacted us, they asked, 'How can I help you?' 'Please go to our school and teach English to my teachers and the principal,' I said. Then I came. It's an eagerness to learn (I. 26: 65-71).

Now 'both the principal and teachers have changed their mind and started to learn English' (I. 26: 35).

Teachers have to learn English because now they have a clear motivation. The school is very fair to all. If teachers can speak English, they have the opportunity to go abroad. The business trip is fully funded. That is a visible gain (I. 26: 40-42)

This data showed that at first, teachers are under a lot of stress when participating in international cooperation activities due to their limited English capacity. This practice is quite popular in public schools when teachers are not equipped with English. English teachers, due to focusing on teaching grammar for a long time, listening and speaking skills are not sharpened. When there are international cooperation activities, teachers realize potential benefits from learning English. For instance, if teachers can use English

fluently, they would have more opportunities to be involved in activities and develop themselves professionally. When having a clear motivation, they learn English actively and voluntarily. The school has fully supported teachers in learning English by organizing English courses for teachers. In short, cooperating with foreign schools might be both a challenge and an opportunity for teacher professional development. However, teacher learning would be promoted when they have a clear learning motivation, and the school establishes a supportive mechanism and gives constant encouragement.

Sharing is another form of learning. Next, international cooperative relationships do not only mean that Green School learns from its partners, but it could also inspire unique values in visitors. Interviewee 26: 173-86 shared one experience with a Swedish school:

During the last visit of school S., they were quite embarrassed about why we [Green School] are so enthusiastic. They were confused because they had not prepared well. For instance, on the first day, I presented my school to them and asked them for a short presentation of their school. They just thought that a short presentation means a simple oral presentation. As they saw our professionalism from the first minute when welcoming them in the airport, the delegation, including one school principal and four vice-principals had to stay up until one a.m. to prepare for another presentation. I saw they were a little bit nervous. After their presentation, the school principal admitted that ‘my biggest mistake before this business trip was that I had underestimated Asia and Vietnam. When I visit your school, I realized that we could learn so many things from you’. It means that we have at least the value of professionalism.

It could be seen that the interviewee was quite confident and proud of what Green School has tried. It means that the school is involved in international cooperation with a

clear goal of learning from foreign partners, but it has made sustained efforts to improve its capacity and present its value. Thus, it is suggested that learning is an exchange process, at first Green School adapts good practices from foreign partners. Then, when being involved in cooperative activities, the school can inspire others through its unique values such as friendliness and eagerness to learn or establish new values such as professionalism.

In another case, Green School was assigned to prepare for organizing a training program for one secondary school, which is in the initial phase of its establishment (O. 3: 341-349). In a school meeting, the principal shared her plan with teachers:

It is planned that they [teachers of school partners] will visit our school and be involved in all activities like you [teachers of Green School] ... Thus, I hope that lead teachers and member teachers will discuss this to devise a plan. We should be active in this activity to support them and bring the most exciting experience to them, and they can get useful experience in this training course. ... We had planned some training programs. For example, we had training with Mr. T [a training on testing and evaluation]. They could also participate in similar training. Or there could be some training on implementing co-curricular activities. In short, we offer essential content, and I am trying to work on it. It means that both lead teachers and member teachers will join together. I think that we should join together because one attractive feature of our school is we are always fond of learning and sharing with colleagues to improve our knowledge (O. 3: 349-367).

It could be inferred that although this was only a task assigned by its governing body, Green School actively supported its school partner as much as possible. It does not hesitate to share experiences related to its strengths such as co-curricular activities. The school does not only share theoretical knowledge but also allows teachers of school

partners to be involved in all professional activities at both the school level and the teacher group level. Moreover, the principal encouraged the involvement of all teachers in sharing experiences with their colleagues of school partners. She did not consider this activity as a way of helping its partner but a good learning and sharing opportunity for teachers ‘to improve our knowledge.’ Thus, it is suggested that in most school-to-school cooperation, even with weaker or less experienced school partners, Green School puts the ultimate goal on learning because it believes that teachers would definitely learn something from others. This hypothesis is further proved in another case. Green School has a unique idea that links a charity activity with knowledge sharing to a school partner located in the mountainous area. A teacher introduced the Sustainable Charity Project:

School-to-school cooperation is not only international cooperation, but we also share with others. As we have learned a lot from developed countries, we have to share what we’ve learned. Because if we wish to have a developed community, it must be based on sharing. We train and exchange with other schools. We have a Sustainable Charity Project in Ha Giang province. It is not only a charity that brings things or gives money or gifts, but we also provide training for teachers: how to organize activities for teacher groups, how to implement group work for students, how to organize co-curricular activities for students. We train to help teachers be able to do these. We hope that in the next three or four years, they could be able to do them. We will train them until they do not need us anymore. We did not only call for contributing money and giving gifts. We also benefit from this exchange. Our teachers who are trainers are under absolute pressure. Very stressful. For example, if we are going to visit Ha Giang province next week, all the teachers are on fire because we have to train them, instruct them. As we are trainers, if we are not competent and experienced, we are not able to train them.

Thus, our teachers have to prepare a lot. When coming back, all the teachers were so happy because we could share experience with colleagues in a disadvantaged area (O. 5: 363-377).

It seems that Green School is aware that because it is a beneficiary of international cooperation, it has a responsibility to share knowledge and experiences with disadvantaged schools. In this case, the school partner is located in a disadvantaged area and has many difficulties in school management. For Sustainable Charity Project, Green School aims to not only support financial resources or school facilities for the partner but also develop teacher professionalism. This strategy further proved that Green School especially highlights the importance of teachers' professionalism as a key factor contributing to improving education quality. Green School's teachers did not share theoretical knowledge but their own experience from practice such as co-curricular activities, teacher group work, student group work. Green School recognized one benefit that when sharing and training peers, teachers also get more experience because 'if we are not good and experienced, we are not able to train them.' Furthermore, teachers feel happy when they share useful knowledge to those who need it. It is a strong motivation for teachers to maintain this activity for a long time. In short, when being involved in school-to-school cooperation, Green School always found opportunities to learn and develop their professional capacity for both the school and its school partners.

Differences are the main barriers. Research data reflected that Green School has loose cooperation with other secondary schools in the same city. The first factor influencing school-to-school cooperation is the closeness between school principals. For example:

We [schools] are friends because school principals are friends, and those principals are friendly. Some principals did not welcome us when we visited his or

her school. It was very sad. ... Sometimes I proposed cooperation, but they did not accept, I cannot do anything more. I guess that because we involved in many activities, for example, many meetings and activities organized by the DoET, thus now school-to-school cooperation is (pause) (I. 26: 280-285).

This response indicated that although Green School is quite active in developing cooperation with other schools, other school leaders did not support the idea. Besides the unwillingness to cooperate with other public schools, the interviewee gave another clue that schools in the same area had been involved in many activities and meetings organized by the DoET, and then she paused. It could be interpreted that as public schools were involved in many activities, they do not have enough time and resources to cooperate with Green School. Other interview data provided further explanations for this situation. The difference in terms of educational practice is one remarkable barrier to school-to-school cooperation. Being one of the first public school with a pilot school-based curriculum, Green School is not able to exchange innovative ideas and expertise with others. ‘Although we want to cooperate with them [other schools], we do not share a school-based curriculum’ (I. 26: 272-274). In addition, the extent of teacher autonomy in Green School is mostly different from that in other secondary schools. Therefore, sharing and cooperation could be limited because the ideas could be feasible in Green School but inappropriate in other school contexts. Interviewee 24: 109-110 reported: ‘Cooperation is sporadic. We [teachers of public schools] only meet in training courses’ which are required by DoET. Interviewee 22: 96-101 suggested:

I think when the general mechanism could change that the ministry would offer a national curriculum framework and grant full autonomy in teaching and learning to schools and teachers. The school would apply output-based assessment, which means students achieve specific learning objectives at a particular stage of the

learning process. At that time, learning and sharing between schools would be beneficial. If there are any interesting ideas, we would be self-conscious about learning between schools.

The data might imply that the current national curriculum framework and limited teacher autonomy have created enormous barriers for school-to-school cooperation. When most schools share the same curriculum, teachers have limited space for innovative ideas, and they have no excitement to share and learn from other schools. Therefore, the interviewee expected that greater autonomy for schools and teachers in curriculum development and teaching and learning would be favorable conditions to promote sharing between public school teachers.

Another barrier to school-to-school cooperation is differences in school culture. Interviewee 14: 145-151 reflected that she is not active when being involved in school-to-school activities because she does not know the culture of other schools. She explained:

Recently I participated in a seminar between several schools. I feel that school-to-school discussion seems to be less open than discussion within a school. I think so. For example, when having discussions in my school or professional group, we know each other very well. They will clearly understand that my comments, whether good or bad, are constructive criticism. But when in other school contexts, I do not know what people will think about my comments. Thus, I just voice my opinion at a moderate level.

Interviewee 23: 226-232 recognized that whereas she is very active about learning, her colleagues from other public schools are not interested in it. She offered these comparisons:

The effectiveness of training [in school-to-school cooperation] depends on ourselves [teachers]. For me, I learn a lot from teaching observations with my

peers in other schools because I have a clear motivation that I come here to learn. Some colleagues in other schools, they just attend for a while and then leave the class. Or in reflection sessions, I always express my ideas openly, whereas some teachers might be shy of raising questions or sharing critical ideas. It all depends on you.

It could be seen that the teacher had a strong learning motivation as she worked in a vibrant learning community of Green School, where sharing ideas, raising constructive questions, or contributing critical ideas are general practices. In contrast, teachers in other public schools are involved in training courses as a required mission, and they are not familiar with active professional development activities.

In short, it could be concluded that differences in school autonomy, education practice, and school values are recognized as crucial barriers to loose cooperation between Green School and public schools. It is suggested that Green School has chosen to develop an active learning community within the school because it realized that developing an internal learning community is more practical and less challenging than establishing a learning network with other schools.

Chapter Summary

Four themes have emerged from the data analysis of this study. The first theme highlights school changes since the introduction of a school-based curriculum. Although the school and teachers were not able to make substantial changes to the national curriculum, participants recognized initial improvements thanks to the school-based curriculum such as flexibility and the experiment of new instructional methods. A competence-based approach was experimented with for the first time and made initial positive changes to classroom practice such as increasing teacher autonomy in teaching, and turning from the teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach. The

school also utilized its autonomy to offer many new programs such as advanced programs, extra courses, physical and art education, and co-curricular activities to respond to the diverse needs of students. School autonomy in curriculum development allowed the school to create school identity and increase their competitiveness with other public schools. The strategy when realizing school-based curriculum is setting achievable objectives, encouraging innovations, and being consistent with long-term goals. However, a school-based curriculum was a big challenge to teachers when they lack experience and expertise in curriculum development and competence-based approach. The school-based curriculum was largely limited in the context of high-stakes exams and by the constraint of local governing bodies.

Performance-based pay emerged as the second theme of this grounded theory study. School autonomy in personnel and finance allowed the school to develop a performance-based pay system, which includes students' test results, students' reflections, peer-review, and the evaluation of the School Administration Board. Although each of these factors might have its pros and cons, the combination of these contributing factors resulted in an accurate and comprehensive appraisal result. Being different from tenure-based pay, the performance-based pay in this school remunerates teachers according to their performance and contributions. Teachers expressed their satisfaction with their salary and the performance-based pay system. This system was also used as a management tool to stimulate teachers for gaining expected outcomes and school strategies. Besides the official remuneration, the school often recognized and encouraged small efforts of teachers.

The third theme, teachers, has a strong link to the second one. This study pointed out the most important work motivations of teachers in the context of school autonomy, namely working for a livelihood and job security, working for self-development, and

working for self-respect. These motivations are considerably different from those of teachers working in regular public schools. However, working in a self-financed school put a lot of pressure on most teachers when there were many school requirements, a daunting administrative workload, and many challenges to maintain harmonious relationships with students' parents. Although having a high professional autonomy, teachers enjoyed a limited autonomy in making school-level decisions, especially in personnel and financial matters. The school granted a high professional autonomy to teacher groups in generally and to lead teachers in particularly. Although the difference of teachers in terms of experience, expertise, type of labor contract led to some limitations, it promoted the value of diversity encouragement in teacher groups. All teachers were encouraged to generate new ideas and promote their distinctive values.

The fourth theme presents the most noticeable school values that emerged from research data. School autonomy resulted in a great dedication to students. The school and teachers especially respected student autonomy and made every effort for the success of students. The school maintained a strong link to parents and involved them in many school educational activities. Although parents can have an influence on educational issues, they were not deeply involved in school decision-making processes, particularly in school finance and personnel. School autonomy facilitated the school as a learning organization when every teacher had a strong motivation to learn and develop. Teachers were willing to support others in learning and they also learned from others. The schools developed a lot of school-to-school collaboration with the main purpose of learning from good practices; and it also actively shared its experience and knowledge to other schools.

The next chapter generates a substantive theory on the impacts of school autonomy and discusses the key findings in relation to the extant literature.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

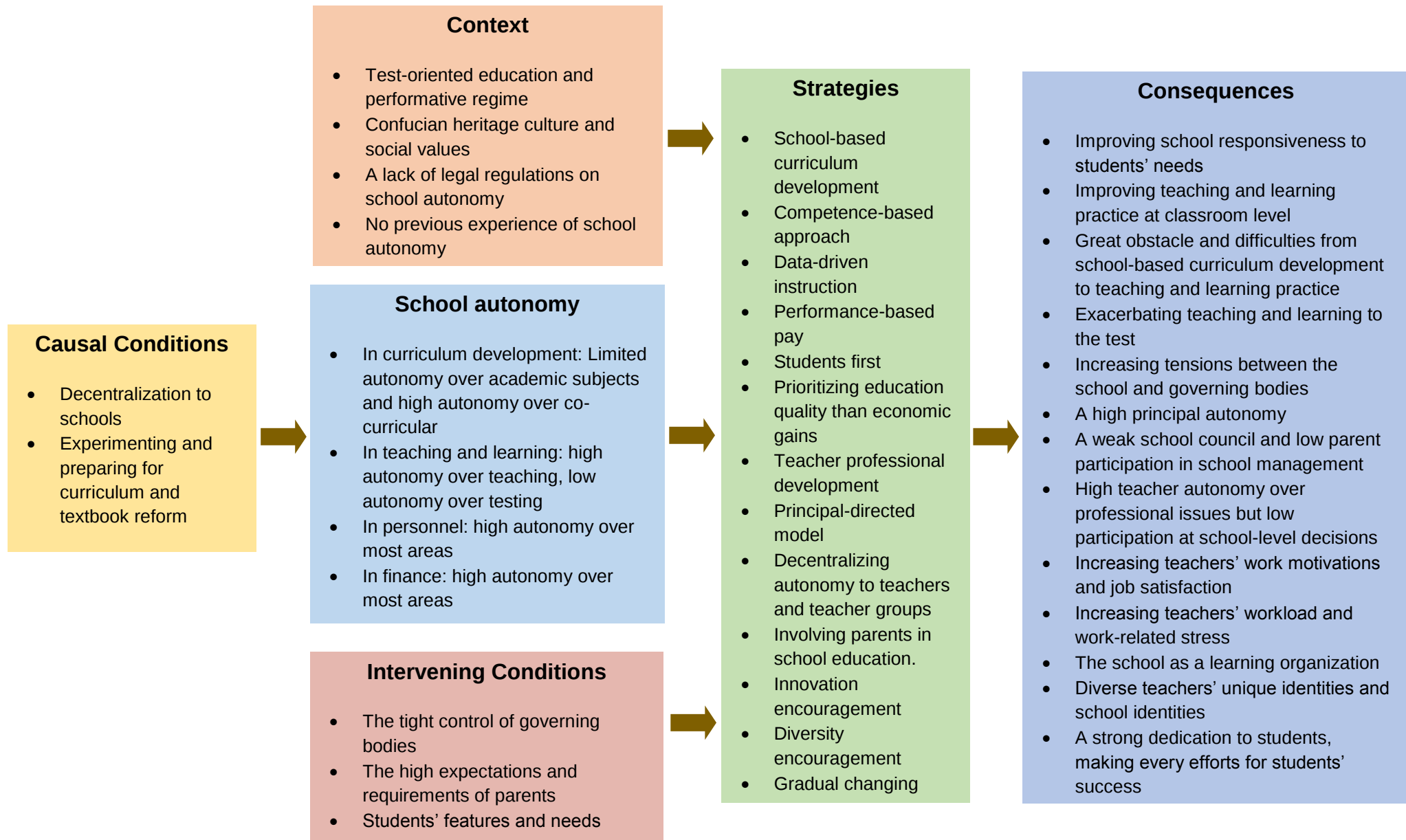
The previous chapter introduced key findings relating to the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of a school. Research data has shown the emergence of four key themes and their sub-categories: school-based curriculum, performance-based pay, teachers, and school values. Analysis and interpretations of data have arrived at findings, which are then synthesized with key findings to solve research questions. In this chapter, comparisons are constructed between the emergent themes of this study and those from the extant literature. For discussion, the findings are presented and discussed in sequence according to sub-research questions.

The Grounded Theory

During the analytic process, relationships have been formed between categories through the employment of constant comparisons and memos. This section synthesizes the substantive theory grounded on an analysis of the findings at a more conceptual level. Figure 5 presents the substantive theory of the impacts of school autonomy on different aspects of a school. The theory, which refers to Strauss and Corbin's approach, incorporates a causal condition, contextual factors, the central phenomena, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. First, school autonomy is identified as the central phenomenon of this study, and it is described via the extent of autonomy over main areas of education, personnel, and finance. The causal condition behind school autonomy is the trend in education toward decentralization in schools and experimentation with the coming curriculum and textbook reform in Vietnam. Second, the current research highlights several contextual factors influencing school autonomy such as test-oriented education and performative regimes, Confucian values, and social values, and a lack of legal regulations as well as practical experience in school autonomy.

The implementation of school autonomy is strongly affected by intervening conditions, namely the tight control of governing bodies, the high expectations and requirements of students' parents, and school students' features and needs. Third, this study investigates several distinctive school strategies, which are only applicable in the context of school autonomy, such as a school-based curriculum, experimenting with competency-based approach, applying performance-based pay systems, and decentralizing the autonomy of teachers and teacher groups. Other strategies, which are linked to school philosophies, cultural values, or priorities such as giving students priority, being concerned with the quality of education, emphasizing teacher professional development, maintaining a strong link with parents, and encouraging innovation and diversity in the school organization. The school maintains a principal-directed model where principals have the highest autonomy and responsibility regarding most crucial school matters. Last, the study points out the consequences of school autonomy in educational matters, school structure, teachers, and school culture.

Figure 5. The substantive theory of school autonomy



Discussions of Key Findings

The Impact of School Autonomy on Educational Processes

Increasing school responsiveness to students' needs.

The first sub-research question sought to explore how participants perceive the impact of school autonomy on educational activities in their school. First, the findings of this study were in line with the earlier theoretical idea that school autonomy has increased school responsiveness to students' needs and has served students better (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010; Bandur, 2012a; Y. C. Cheng, 1993; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; R. H. Heck et al., 2001; Heredia-Ortiz, 2007; Ng & Chan, 2008; Osorio et al., 2009). Although this study was unable to determine whether the quality of the school-based curriculum is better than that of the national one, the main point is the school has made every effort to investigate and satisfy various learning needs of students. On the one hand, the school must respond to basic learning needs of students (and parents) such as learning to get good test scores or to prepare for high-stakes exams by the introduction of an advanced program or intensive test preparation courses. On the other hand, it put an emphasis on satisfying other learning needs, which are generally undervalued in the current national curriculum and other public schools, such as physical education, art education, English, and co-curricular activities. This finding is consistent with that of previous studies indicating that in a school autonomy context, schools tend to offer many education programs to meet students' needs (Clausen et al., 2007; Hughes & Silva, 2013; Miron & Nelson, 2000; White, 1992; Wylie, 1997). Noticeably, when developing a school-based curriculum, the school offered many options to respond to the diverse needs of students, even when limited to school facilities and resources. The school in this study is an illustrative example of mobilizing external resources such as parents and school partners to involve them in school education. As a result, students were able to enjoy more

exciting learning experiences and develop various learning and social skills. This finding differs from earlier studies that showed that when school autonomy was combined with external tests and a performative regime, schools are likely to turn their attention to core subjects and devalue non-core ones (Clausen et al., 2007; Keddle, 2014, 2017; Perry & McWilliam, 2007). It is argued that school autonomy provides extensive freedom and flexibility for public schools to develop and apply various education programs according to students' needs and school resources. In most cases of this study, noticeably, the school developed or modified curriculum not based on the school's expectations nor governing bodies' direction but the concrete features and needs of school students. This feature might indicate the school's consumer orientation, which is a core feature of market orientation (Narver & Slater, 1990). Particularly in this study, being self-financed, the school shows a strong consumer orientation in which students (and their parents) are considered important customers. The school and teachers paid substantial attention to understanding and commitment to students, resulting in increased values for students (Drysdale, 2003). The finding of this study also corroborates the idea of Y. C. Cheng (1993) that in the context of school-based management, the nature of school activities must be based on the characteristics and needs of schools and students.

This study contributes important empirical findings regarding the limitations of the current national curriculum in Vietnam. It is in agreement with previous studies indicating that the national curriculum failed in terms of meeting the diverse learning needs of schools and students (Duong, 2013; T. A. Le, 2006). This study proved that in a changing social and educational environment, the center-based approach in curriculum development, which produces a one-size-fits-all curriculum and tight frameworks, is unable to be applied to schools with different backgrounds, goals, practices, and students' needs. For academic subjects, MoET's curriculum was overwhelming to most students in

terms of theoretical knowledge, whereas it undervalued students' competency and skill development. The MoET's co-curricular program is monotonous and inappropriate in different school contexts. Therefore, this study supports the concept of school-based curriculum development in which schools have a higher authority to develop or modify the curriculum. Although school-based curriculum development has not been widely applied in Vietnam, it promises to become a prevalent practice in the coming years because the new national general curriculum plans to leave more space for schools and teachers in selecting or developing localized learning content (MoET, 2018b). In addition, the present study proves that schoolteachers are those who understand school students and their needs rather than any higher authority or textbook experts, and they should enjoy higher authority in curriculum development. This finding, which despite being revealed in many previous international studies (Y. C. Cheng, 2000; Heredia-Ortiz, 2007; B. Jensen, 2013; Wößmann, 2003b), is reported in the context of Vietnamese education for the first time because MoET leaves teachers in Vietnam with no authority or responsibility for curriculum development.

Although utilizing school autonomy to respond to students' needs is a positive result, this study explored several potential problems surrounding this situation. First, with the new national general curriculum, the MoET plans to give public schools more autonomy in curriculum development (MoET, 2018b). However, the finding of this study warns that granting extensive autonomy to other public schools should be implemented with great caution at this time. Having been under a highly hierarchical education system for a long time, most public schools are passive and likely to depend on guidelines and directions from governing bodies rather than initiating new ideas (T. H. Le, 2013). In addition, schools might not clearly understand the limitations of the current national curriculum as well as their students' needs, and they might not be able to develop a

school-based curriculum to meet those needs. When enjoying autonomy in curriculum development, other public schools should be aware of difficulties that the school and teachers in this study have undergone such as lack of experience, expertise, and consensus. Despite employing many qualified teachers and having good resources, it took a couple of years for the school in this study to introduce a school-based curriculum. Therefore, education changes should be made with thorough preparation in terms of professional competencies, documents, leadership, and change management strategies.

Second, agency theory warns that when governing bodies (the principal) grant autonomy to the school (the agent) to perform tasks, the school has an informational advantage over the principal, and opportunistic behaviors might occur (M. C. Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ferris, 1992; Moe, 1984; Ross, 1973). Although no specific evidence was detected in this study, the economic driver might be one justification underlying the introduction of many education programs when the public self-financed school tries to increase the school budget as much as possible. Furthermore, this situation might raise concerns about the quality of school-based education programs because there are currently neither regulations nor a quality framework to control the school-based curriculum. For instance, there is uncertainty whether the school strategy of transforming all classes into ‘high quality’ classes could lead to actual quality improvement or just changing the label and increasing learning time from one to two periods per day. Therefore, setting the quality framework and increasing school accountability would be essential solutions to promote school autonomy and creativity on the one hand while ensuring education quality and avoiding opportunistic behaviors on the part of the school on the other hand.

Third, the findings of this study show that school autonomy in curriculum development might be a threat that could exacerbate teaching and learning to the test. In

many school autonomy contexts, increasing instructional time is a popular strategy to improve school performance, for instance to support students struggling in academic subjects (Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007), or to focus on non-core subjects such as fine art, foreign languages, and vocational skills (Zimmer et al., 2003; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Wylie, 1997). These objectives are also recorded in the present study. However, the school remarkably increased instructional time with a strong emphasis on preparing for tests and high-stakes exams, particularly in ‘key subjects.’ This curriculum structure reflects a typical test-oriented education in Vietnam, and even schools with academic autonomy must accept it as an unavoidable tendency. On the one hand, high-stakes exams have had a chief influence on the structure and instructional hours of school-based curriculum. On the other hand, the design of the school-based curriculum with a strong emphasis on key subjects might aggravate the culture of teaching to the test and turn students’ attention to these subjects only. In addition, although there is no clear evidence reflecting the negative consequence of increasing school hours of students, this might be a matter of concern.

Changes in teaching and learning practice at the classroom level.

Some published studies were concerned that school autonomy has no link with innovation at the classroom level (Cheng & Mok, 2007; Dimmock & Walker, 1998). However, the findings of the present study match those observed in other previous studies that school autonomy can facilitate innovations and improvements in teaching and learning (Cannata & Penaloza, 2012; Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Elmelegy, 2015; Fryer, 2012; Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008; Powers, 2009; Wohlstetter, 1995; Wylie, 1997). Thanks to applying a school-based curriculum and a competency-based approach, teachers in this study have more freedom and flexibility to experiment with new teaching and learning methods such as project-based learning, blended learning, or inter-subject

learning. These instructional approaches and methods are rarely applied in other regular public schools due to many barriers such as time-constraints connected with national teaching and learning schedules, teachers' inexperience, or teachers' low motivation to change. Although research data may be somewhat limited to confirm whether these new teaching and learning methods are better than traditional ones, it is clear that school autonomy allows teachers to realize improvements at the classroom level. Moreover, this study proves that school autonomy has facilitated a gradual transition from the teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach in teaching and learning. This feature shows a positive improvement in comparison to other public schools in Vietnam, where the teacher-centered approach remains prevalent (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Previously, teachers were concerned with how to transmit knowledge as much as possible or how to sharpen students' test-taking skills. Since the introduction of the competency-based approach, teachers turn more attention to how to best support students to obtain learning objectives, and how to develop students' competencies. Although these improvements are really in their infant phase, the study proves that when the school-based curriculum and school leaders support teacher autonomy, they can make significant changes to classroom practice.

One school strategy associated with improvements at the classroom level is data-driven instruction, which is in line with recent studies in other school autonomy contexts (Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Fryer, 2012; Hamilton Associates, 2015). The common feature of data-driven instruction strategy in this study and previous literature is that data collection and analysis strongly contribute to the purpose of education improvements such as monitoring student performance, investigating shortcomings in teaching and learning, and guiding teaching practice (Furgeson et al., 2012). The school in this study collected students' test scores during the academic year as a vital source to monitor

students' progress and performance. By monitoring this data, the school and teachers could quickly pinpoint the area of weakness and apply timely interventions. Particularly in this study, students' test scores are an essential indicator of teacher appraisal, which could directly link to teachers' salary. Therefore, this strategy would be a positive influence on teachers' work motivation when teachers must make constant efforts to improve teaching and learning practice as well as student performance. However, in contrast to previous studies, collecting data related to student academic results is actively linked to monitoring and preparing for high-stakes exams in the context of a test-oriented education in Vietnam. In addition, the school also uses this data as a way to demonstrate school accountability to governing bodies and parents. These purposes might affect the ultimate goal of data-driven instruction and exacerbate teaching and learning to the test. It can also increase stress on teachers when students' test scores become one crucial indicator reflecting their teaching performance. Therefore, the implementation of a data-driven strategy should be made with great caution to obtain the goal of school improvement.

Several problems surround the impact of school autonomy on teaching and learning practice. First, this study suggests that the success of school autonomy at the classroom level depends on the competency of teaching, school capacity, and teacher professional development. If the new national curriculum grants curriculum autonomy to public schools, governing bodies and schools should be aware of the difficulties and barriers that were investigated in this study. New practices such as school-based curriculum development, competency-based approach, and student-centered approach would be significant challenges to teachers since most of them have no experience or expertise in these fields. For a long time, teaching and learning have been firmly based on textbook content, and teachers still play a dominant role in this process. Due to the

pressure of transmitting textbook knowledge, teachers maintain traditional teaching and learning methods like lecturing and questioning. Teaching and learning are constrained by contextual factors such as large class size or inadequate school resources. These findings were mentioned in several previous studies on the current limitations of teaching and learning in public schools in Vietnam (Hamano, 2008; V. C. Le & Barnard, 2009; P. M. Nguyen et al., 2005; Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; N. L. L. Nguyen, 2018; T. H. Nguyen, 2017). However, the present study is the first one that sheds light on how these limitations become considerable obstacles to teaching and learning in the context of school autonomy. For example, as teachers are not trained in curriculum development and competency-based approach, they must investigate it by themselves without support or guidance from experts or governing bodies. The trial-and-error method is time-consuming and might lead to teachers' misunderstanding about these concepts. The teacher-centered approach and current textbook are also proved as disadvantageous for applying new teaching and learning methods of the competency-based approach like project-based learning. In short, if school autonomy in curriculum development and instruction does not associate with in-service training and professional development activities to change teacher perceptions and improve their capacities, teachers will not be able to perform good teaching. Furthermore, this study found that large class size would be a severe problem when applying the school-based curriculum. With the current national curriculum, teachers can perform teaching and learning methods like lecturing or questioning, even in large class sizes with inadequate resources. In contrast, a school-based curriculum development and a competency-based approach can be realized only when there are sufficient resources and small class sizes. Although the school in this study utilized its autonomy to reduce student admission gradually, this strategy might be infeasible to all public schools. Due to the pressure of the increased population in the

urban area, the number of students in public schools is enormous and keeps increasing. If many public self-financed schools reduce student admissions, students' education accessibility might be affected, and the school budget could be decreased. Therefore, school autonomy should only be granted to schools that have sufficient resources and capacity to ensure the quality of teaching and learning.

Second, this study highlights the negative impact of school autonomy on educational practice in the context of high-stakes exams and performative regimes. This finding is in contrast to Wößmann and his associates' quantitative studies, which concluded that external standardized tests could invigorate the benefit of school autonomy (Fuchs & Wößmann, 2007; Wößmann, 2003). The finding would be typical in the context of a test-oriented education in Vietnam, where the ultimate goal of teaching and learning is to prepare for tests and gain higher performance. Some previous Vietnamese studies had mentioned the influence of high-stakes exams in teaching and learning practice in regular public schools (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; L. A. Pham, 2017; H. N. Nguyen, 2016; Do and Yuenyong, 2017). On the one hand, this study adds that high-stakes exams are a significant constraint on school autonomy when teaching and learning are primarily affected by tests. The school is granted autonomy in curriculum and instruction, whereas testing and assessment are still centrally regulated. Therefore, although the school and teachers support the competency-based approach as well as innovations in teaching and learning, they are under the enormous pressure to prepare students for tests. Students' competency development and test preparation are conflicting goals in teaching and learning when the current form of tests and exams focus too much on testing students' theoretical knowledge and memory while ignoring assessing their competencies. Therefore, teachers must give more priority to the goal of teaching to the test than developing students' competencies. In other words, despite enjoying school

autonomy, the school cannot resist the influence of test-based education. On the other hand, school autonomy might exacerbate test-oriented education when the school utilized its autonomy to alter their curriculum and instructional practice to focus on test preparation. This finding was previously mentioned in recent studies exploring the likelihood that when school autonomy is combined with audit culture and a performative regime, schools might give their priority only to key subjects relating to the test and devalue others (Boyle & Charles, 2011; Clausen et al., 2007; Keddie, 2015b; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). In this case study, the school significantly increased the instructional time of key subjects as well as offered advanced programs and intensive test preparation courses. The performance-based pay mechanism, which takes student achievement in tests and exams into account of teacher appraisal and remuneration, also worsens teaching and learning to the test when teachers must mainly focus on the goal of increasing their students' results. In short, in the context of current high-stakes exams and social perception of teaching to the test, a school-based curriculum as well as the competency-based approach cannot be realized. The findings of this study suggest that the new national curriculum must be associated with new forms of testing and assessment, and schools should enjoy more autonomy in this field. If there is no change in national assessment framework and social perceptions regarding testing and assessment, school autonomy or new curriculum would be not able to make positive improvements in teaching and learning. In addition, schools should actively increase parents' awareness of school changes to gain their support since most parents are concerned that a school-based curriculum or competency-based approach might decrease their children's performance.

Heightening tension between school and governing bodies.

Research findings of the current study show that school autonomy might contribute to an increased tension between school members and local governing bodies.

Previously, governing bodies have maintained a top-down relationship with schools under their governance, and they have considerable authority to influence school practice.

However, since the school enjoyed more autonomy in making decisions in many areas, it reflects that governing bodies seriously intervene in their work. Governing bodies still maintain a conservative mindset and do not keep up to date with constant changes of school educational practice. They do not support changes and improvements at both the classroom and school level and pay much attention to administrative rather than professional supervision. The tight control of governing bodies, consequently, increases teachers' work dissatisfaction when their efforts at improvement are opposed and even criticized. Their administrative workload was also significantly increased due to the severe scrutiny of governing bodies. These features might reflect a long-established hierarchical relationship between governing bodies and schools under governance in Vietnam (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016). Traditionally, governing bodies have held powerful authority and strong influence on schools, whereas teachers are ranked lowest in the hierarchical education structure (T. H. Nguyen, 2017; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Moreover, as Vietnamese culture highlights the philosophy of harmony in organizational and social relationships (Doan, 2005; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016), teachers tend to accept the judgement of higher authorities to avoid conflict or undesired consequences instead of voicing their opinion to protect their ideas.

The tension between the school and governing bodies in this study echoes ideas of agency theory (or principal-agent theory) (M. C. Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Moe, 1984; Ross, 1973). Although the original form of this theory mainly applied to individual relationships in economics, it could be applied to relationships between government bodies and organizations and institutions (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). In this case, the state governing bodies, designated as the principal, engages the school, designated as the

agent, to perform an educational mission on behalf of the principal. The theory assumes that once the principal delegates authority to the agent, it often has control problems due to goal conflict and asymmetric information. In this contractual relationship, the principal has formal authority and commitment to broader educational goals such as public education quality while having limited time and expertise to exercise that authority. The agent has advantages in terms of expertise and information to perform his or her delegated missions (Ness, 2010). Therefore, it could be explained that when granting autonomy to schools, governing bodies are likely to tightly control and monitor to maintain the accomplishment of delegated goals and to avoid school's opportunistic behaviors. For instance, BoET directs that the school must achieve high student test scores in high-stakes exams. This situation could be seen as a potent intervention to school autonomy and might be attributed to the 'achievement syndrome' where the BoET expected that schools under their management could get good results in the examination as a proof of their excellent management. However, from the viewpoint of agency theory, the BoET (the principal) is trying to ensure the school (the agent) meets its education goals such as student performance. In this study, governing bodies apply police patrol strategies (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984), which emphasize direct and centralized activities such as a regular administrative report, regular audit, and approval procedures. It is suggested that governing bodies should set clear performance requirements and responsibilities to the school at first to reduce this tension (Ness, 2010). Then they should change the accountability mechanism to performance-based instead of current direct and regular monitoring. The fire alarm strategy, which tends to increase the transparency of information and progress, might be suitable in this case (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). Governing bodies should also change their role from monitoring and checking to supporting schools, particularly in professional development. The support of governing

bodies will create a favorable condition for schools to perform school autonomy better (Y. C. Cheng, 1993). In addition, public self-financed schools could also actively promote signaling activities that provide information to enhance governing bodies' perceptions of school changes (Ness, 2010).

The Impacts of School Autonomy on School Structure

High principal autonomy versus weak school council.

The second sub-research question is concerned with how school autonomy makes changes to school structure. First, this study found that school autonomy in Vietnam is associated with a high level of principal autonomy in making school-level decisions in most essential areas. Generally, school principals play a crucial role in leading and managing schools (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Thayer, 2014), and their authority is significantly increased in the context of school autonomy. The work of the principal in this study illustrates the idea of Cheng (1993) regarding the three key roles of school leadership in the school autonomy contexts, namely, goal developer and leader, manpower starter and coordinator, and resource developer. Regarding educational matters, although school-based curriculum development is decentralized to lead teachers and teacher groups, the principal is responsible for planning and organizing the whole curriculum development process in the school and has the highest accountability to governing bodies for the quality of the school-based curriculum. The school principal does not directly intervene in teaching and learning at the classroom level, but she initiates the school's educational strategies. In terms of personnel, the school principal plays a decisive role in recruiting teachers, evaluating teacher performance, and remunerating them. The principal has extensive autonomy to decide school finance matters according to school cost norms agreed to by school members. The findings of an increased principal autonomy are in line with earlier studies in different school autonomy

contexts (Arcia & Belli, 1999; Clune & White, 1988; Cranston, 2002; Gobby, 2013; Hamilton Associates, 2015). The finding of this study also confirms previous results that principals in the school autonomy context have much greater autonomy than their peers in regular public schools (Gawlik, 2008; Gersberg, 1999; Zimmer & Buddin, 2007).

When the school principal plays a decisive role in school structure, this study supports the link between school leadership and school improvement in the context of school autonomy as observed in earlier studies (Bush, 2011; Caldwell, 2016; Clune & White, 1988; Collins, 2002; S. G. Huber, 2004; Hamilton Associates, 2015; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Osorio et al., 2009). In contrast to the doubt that principals are not able to utilize school autonomy effectively (Steinberg & Cox, 2016), this study proves that when enjoying extensive freedom, the principal tends to seek innovative solutions to improve school practice. The introduction of performance-based pay is an example of her efforts in creating a competitive working environment and improving teachers' job satisfaction. These findings are radically different from school leadership practices in Vietnam. As the education system maintains a highly hierarchical structure, Vietnamese principals must obey the directions and execution of higher governing bodies and have limited room for applying their own initiatives (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger & Walker, 2017). As a consequence, principals become more passive as they have to wait for and depend on guidelines and directions of governing bodies in making most decisions (T. H. Le, 2013). In other words, the current education structure is a considerable constraint that limits school principals from making significant school innovations. The finding of this study proves that school autonomy does not directly increase school principals' capacity and creativity, but it is just a good condition for school principals to think out of the box and realize their innovative ideas (Gobby, 2013; Keedie, 2017). The principal in this study is very active and creative, and

the school autonomy context allows her to make substantial changes to the school. These findings further confirm the importance of school leadership for the success of schools in the school autonomy context (Bush, 2011, 2016; Caldwell, 2016; W. H. Clune & White, 1988; Collins, 2002; Hamilton Associates, 2015; S. G. Huber, 2004; Keddle, 2015b, 2015a, 2017; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017) and call for a greater autonomy for principals in leading and managing schools.

The establishment of the school council is by regulation, and compulsory for all secondary schools in Vietnam (MoET, 2011c) and this body is expected to play a crucial role in making school-level decisions and supervising school practice. However, school councils, in fact, play a minor role in school management of most schools and this study further proves that even when schools enjoyed greater autonomy, the authority of the school council was not increased accordingly. In contrast to a significant increase in principal autonomy, this study reports that school autonomy did not make any remarkable changes to the authority of the school council. The school council was established from school principal, vice-principals, and representatives of teachers, and administrative staff, whereas there were no representatives from parents, students, or the local community. The school council in this study maintains a weak voice in most areas of school management, just like in other public schools. The present study did not find any evidence of parent participation in school management. Parents were an important school partner in educating students and a significant source of financial contribution to the school budget. They could have a remarkable influence on teaching and learning practices, such as reporting problems or making a request to teachers or school principals. However, there is no research finding regarding the influence of parents on personnel management, school finance, or school strategy planning.

The findings of this study echo the idea of principal-directed or administrative control model in which teachers and the school council can contribute their opinions until reaching an agreement, and the school principal makes the final decisions based on agreed ideas (Beck & Murphy, 1998; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Osorio et al., 2009). This decision-making structure implies that the school council functions as an advisory body for the school principal rather than a critical decision-maker. Evidence on the supervisory function of the school council was not detected in this study. One reason underlying these findings, which has been mostly mentioned in earlier studies, is the increasing complexity of school leadership in the school autonomy context compared to the traditional public environment (Mertkan, 2011; Cheng, 1993). The school principal in this study must face non-traditional challenges such as maintaining the school's attractiveness to prospective students, mobilizing the school budget and resources, developing a school-based curriculum, recruiting and paying for teachers, and leading educational changes. However, there are particular reasons to explain the increased principal autonomy and low school council authority in the context of public schools in Vietnam. First, there is currently no specific regulation on school structure for public schools with high autonomy. Consequently, despite being self-financed and having greater school autonomy, the school retains most of the typical features of a regular public school structure (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Thayer, 2014; D. T. Truong, 2013). In public schools, the Communist Party is the supreme political body that leads and supervises all aspects of school practice. All school members, regardless of party affiliation status, must obey and implement the directives of the party (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). In addition, the key role of the school principal in this study is further strengthened by a dual line of political and bureaucratic authority (Duggan, 2001; Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; A. Walker & Hallinger, 2015) where she is both school

principal and General Secretary of Communist Party in the school organization.

Therefore, when a Board of Central Communist Party holds the authority to lead all aspects of school management and the principal has accountability for all school issues (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014), the presence of a current school council turns out to be redundant. Second, the authority of the school council in this study is limited since council members lack expertise and experience to be involved in the collective decision-making process. Due to the top-down school structure and a high power distance (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016), teachers are unfamiliar with being involved in making school decisions. Vietnamese culture offers special respect to teachers and so in most cases, parents are likely to agree with school decisions. They could also be afraid that their disagreement and intervention in school practice might negatively affect their children's studies in the school. Making collective decisions in a school council is rather challenging when the Vietnamese organizational culture highlights the value of harmony. Members in a council tend to accept other opinions to avoid potential tensions and conflicts. For these practical reasons, the school council is not able to play a significant role in school management, even when the school has greater autonomy.

Although no evidence of the principal's abuse of power was detected in this study, it is suggested that in the context of school autonomy, an increased principal autonomy should be associated with an increased school council authority accordingly. When the school enjoys extensive autonomy and becomes a self-managing organization, the work of the school council is essential to create a balance between management and supervision. Notably, the school council must be strengthened in its supervisory role to avoid dictatorial leadership and improve the quality of school decisions. However, increasing the authority of the school council would face enormous obstacles from current political and governing regulations on school structure, such as the role of the Communist

Party and school principals. Since these problems are much beyond the scope of the current study, it is suggested that school council members should have enhanced capacity to be involved in school decision making and supervising school management. A legislative regulation on school principal accountability to the school council would be necessary to supervise the work of the principal in the context of increasing principal autonomy.

A high teacher autonomy over professional issues

The findings of the current study reveal that school autonomy has led to a high level of teacher autonomy in terms of professional issues. This study also provides extensive evidence of the professional role of teachers in the context of a public self-financed school in Vietnam. At the teacher group level, teachers play a crucial role in developing a school-based curriculum in their subject because they are the ones who have profound knowledge and expertise in a specific subject. Particularly, they enjoy considerable autonomy in developing advanced programs and other school-based educational programs. Teachers can suggest their needs in professional development to organize school-based training courses. These findings show that teacher groups in a school autonomy context enjoy higher autonomy in the professional area than their peers in regular public schools. The study also proves that school autonomy has changed school structure towards granting high decentralization to teacher groups.

At the classroom level, teachers enjoy greater autonomy in teaching and learning. They can feel free to select and apply new instructional approaches and methods in their classes. Regarding student assessment, teachers are encouraged to utilize teacher autonomy to experiment with new forms of competency-based assessment. In contrast to teachers working in regular public schools in Vietnam who have very low autonomy to decide professional matters (Phan & Locke, 2016; Saito & Tsukui, 2008), teachers in this

study enjoyed much higher autonomy in most professional aspects. The findings of this study confirm the association between school autonomy and teacher autonomy, which are mentioned in previous empirical studies conducted in the school autonomy context (Berger et al., 2012; Bomotti et al., 1999; Ingersoll, 1996; Marks & Louis, 1999; Miron & Nelson, 2004; Oberfield, 2016; Powers, 2009). These findings also corroborate the idea of Cheng (1993) that uses theory Y and a human resource perspective to describe the human nature of teachers in a school-based management context. Theory Y assumes that because teachers have the features of ambition, creativity, and responsibility, they do not need close supervision to perform their work. Moreover, as teachers are the precious resource of schools, school-based management must encourage human initiatives and develop internal manpower resources. The present study proves that when encountering challenging work and being granted autonomy, teachers can promote their potential creativity and competencies to fulfill the work and to improve teaching and learning practices. In addition, granting teacher autonomy can increase their work motivation where they feel they were being trusted and encouraged. From the view of school change theories, this study confirms the role that teachers play as the primary driver of school changes (Fullan, 1994; Goodson, 2001). In this case study, teachers at first had to face mandated changes from external sources such as government policies or school strategies. These conditions, along with the school autonomy context, have influenced teacher work, and then they initiated and promoted bottom-up education changes. In summary, this study suggests a link between greater teacher autonomy and educational improvements at the classroom level, which was the section mentioned above. These findings further confirm the necessity of a decentralized structure in school organization as well as teacher autonomy at the classroom level to address the fundamental challenges of teaching and learning (B. L. Johnson & Owen, 2005).

The findings of the present study contribute to the literature on the role of lead teachers in the school autonomy context, which is less frequently mentioned in previous studies. In regular public schools, lead teachers are mainly responsible for managing teacher groups in terms of administrative issues and have a weak voice in the professional area. In contrast, lead teachers in this study enjoyed greater autonomy where they could decide most professional matters without seeking approval from school managers. They played a crucial role in planning and organizing teachers to develop a school-based subject curriculum. They could also make decisions on organizing teacher professional development activities in their group. Most noticeably, lead teachers contributed an essential voice in evaluating teacher performance and arranging tasks for teacher members. These findings echo the theory of Cheng (1993) that in school-based management, decision-making is made under a decentralization mechanism. In this case, decentralizing authority to lead teachers has reduced stress on the school principal and encouraged creativity and autonomy at the teacher group level. Therefore, this study supports the idea of granting higher professional autonomy to lead teachers when implementing the new general curriculum in the coming years. In-service training is a necessary condition to prepare lead teachers for dealing with unprecedented challenges they face, particularly planning and leading subject curriculum development, initiating and leading changes, evaluating teachers' performance, mentoring member teachers, and developing teacher groups' culture. However, decentralizing more autonomy to lead teachers might be disadvantageous when they have increased responsibilities. Besides, this study shows that when enjoying autonomy, lead teachers might misuse their authority or mistreat member teachers. Therefore, it is suggested that increasing lead teacher autonomy should be accompanied by greater accountability and a feedback system in which all member teachers can timely report the work of their lead teacher.

Despite these positive results, granting extensive professional autonomy to teachers might not be a feasible solution in all public schools in Vietnam at this time because it is accompanied by many complex problems. In the current study, teachers' professional autonomy was limited by having to follow the 'teaching to the test' culture and teacher accountability. At some point, this finding is in agreement with those obtained in previous studies conducted in other school autonomy contexts where teachers' professional autonomy is constrained by accountability for student outcomes (Crawford, 2001), performativity culture, the compliance perspective of the school principal (Ball, 2003; Keddle, 2017), and the surveillance of internal or external actors (Bomotti et al., 1999; Gawlik, 2007; Gershberg, 1999). Similarly, the freedom of teachers in this study was limited by the tight monitoring of governing bodies that seriously intervened in teachers' work in the classroom. In addition, due to the influence of high-stakes exams, teachers must always give the goal of test preparation a higher priority, and they must be highly accountable to school leaders and parents for student performance. Thus, teachers could not always apply their intended approaches and exercise full professional autonomy. One barrier to teacher autonomy at the classroom level explored in this study, which is not mentioned in earlier studies, is teachers' inexperience and incapacity in making professional decisions. This situation is attributed to the fact that most teachers have not been trained in or experienced professional autonomy. They are familiar with obeying top-down directions and are not ready for initiating changes. When dealing with new practices such as school-based curricula, competency-based learning, and assessment, teachers find it difficult to exercise their granted autonomy. This study shows that even good teachers must spend much time on adapting to mandated changes before exercising their granted autonomy. Moreover, public schools must be aware of other associated conditions such as merit pay and a school culture of encouraging and

supporting teachers' initiatives. Otherwise, teacher autonomy might lead to negative consequences such as an increasing burden on teachers' work or job dissatisfaction. Lastly, there are no concrete regulations on teacher professional autonomy in Vietnam, and the extent of teacher autonomy depends on school leaders. Although this study did not find any evidence on barriers from the school principal, a compliance perspective, which is prevalent in school leadership in Vietnam, might be a cause of harm to teachers' professional autonomy. Therefore, granting teacher autonomy should be secured by regulations promulgated by governing bodies.

Low teacher participation at school level in finance and personnel.

The literature presents mixed results on the extent of teacher participation in school-level decisions. Whereas charter school teachers can strongly voice their opinions over important areas of school management such as the school budget, equipment purchase, hiring and firing personnel (Gawlik, 2007; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Ni, 2012; Oberfield, 2016; Renzulli et al., 2011; Torres, 2014), teachers in other school autonomy contexts have low participation in school decisions (Bomotti et al., 1999; Desurmont et al., 2008; Ho, 2006; Karsten, 1998). Cheng (1993) argued that school-based management should promote a favorable environment for school members to widely participate in school management and to develop their specialties. However, this idea differs from the findings presented in this study. The study found that in contrast to extensive teachers' professional autonomy, teachers had limited autonomy in making school decisions relating to finance and personnel. Teachers in this study could only contribute their ideas in some areas directly related to their work, such as teacher appraisal indicators, teacher professional development, school discipline, and student assessment. After taking all teachers' opinions into account, however, the final decision could not be made by teachers but by the School Administration Board. In key school

areas like personnel recruitment or school budget, teachers had even a weaker influence and low decision-making authority. This study suggests that school autonomy in Vietnam is associated with a hindering centralized school structure, in which teachers are not encouraged to get involved in making school-level decisions (Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

Previous studies listed many factors leading to low teacher autonomy at school levels such as time constraints, reduced teacher empowerment over time, teacher participation but no real influence, and excluding teachers from school management (Murphy & Beck, 1995). However, all of these explanations seem not to be valid in the current study. First, although being transformed into a public self-financed school, Green School maintains the most critical features of public schools where there is an emphasis on the decisive role of the school principal, a top-down structure, and autocratic leadership (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014; Thayer, 2014; D. T. Truong, 2013). Because school principals have a responsibility for the life of the school and given the fact that their central role is managerial and political (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014), they must hold supreme authority in most key areas like personnel and budget and empowering teachers to decide only instructional matters. Second, culturally, Vietnamese teachers are not encouraged to challenge the opinion of school leaders but to maintain a peaceful environment in the workplace (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014, 2016). They also have no significant experience or expertise in school finance or personnel management. Third, being different from regular public schools that receive funds from the state budget and allocate it according to government regulations, the financial matters of a self-financed school are more complicated and challenging when it must mobilize and manage the school budget by itself. Therefore, empowering all teachers to be involved in making school decisions in these fields could generate disorder in school management. Lastly,

since the work of teachers is quite considerable because of recent school changes and increased teacher autonomy, they might lack the time and capacity to be involved in school management matters. Therefore, this study suggests that in the beginning phase of school autonomy the role of teachers should be strengthened to exercise professional autonomy well. Then, they should be gradually facilitated and develop the capacity to be involved in important school issues. Changes in school structure toward an enabling centralization and changes in school culture toward encouraging teachers to express their views are also essential conditions for increasing teacher autonomy in school-level decisions.

The Impacts of School Autonomy on Teachers

Increasing teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction.

The third sub-research question explores how school autonomy makes changes to teachers in a school organization. This study found that school autonomy over personnel matters, which is presented via a performance-based pay policy, has significantly increased teachers' work motivation. Key factors contributing to teacher job satisfaction in the school autonomy context investigated in this study are good pay, job security, recognition, meaningful work, and teacher collegiality. In terms of teacher pay, in contrast to earlier findings (Addonizi, Kearney, & Gawlik, 2015; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron & Nelson, 2000), this study explored the fact that self-financed school teachers can earn more competitive salaries than colleagues in other regular public schools. It has been explained that as charter schools must invest their resources to purchase or renovate facilities, teacher salaries are not a priority of the school budget (Miron & Nelson, 2000). However, in this study, despite being a self-financed school, it puts a high priority on teacher salaries. The finding of this study adds to the literature on Vietnamese teachers (Cobbe, 2007; Do & Yuenyong, 2017; D. C: Nguyen, 2017) that

teachers working in public self-financed schools enjoy a significantly higher salary than colleagues working in regular public schools and are equivalent to those salaries paid in private schools.

The performance-based pay system, which links teacher appraisal results to remuneration and recognition, represents a breakthrough management strategy of the school in this study. This system echoes the ideas of traditional motivation theories such as expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964; Porter & Lawler, 1965; Parker & Dyer, 1976), reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1978), equity theory (Adam, 1963), and organizational justice theory (Adam, 1963). First, the expectancy theory assumes that teachers are motivated by an expectation that a certain level of effort will lead to a specific level of successful performance and then this performance is the way to reach the reward. In other words, their motivational force is the product of their valence, expectancy, and instrumentality (Vroom, 1964; Porter & Lawler, 1965; Parker & Dyer, 1976). In a tenure-based pay system, public school teachers in Vietnam received salaries according to their years of working experience, no matter how much effort they make. In contrast, teachers in this study could understand the exact connection between their daily efforts, outcomes, and obtained reward. The performance-based pay motivates teachers by a strong belief that if they make efforts and attain excellent performance, they will receive respective rewards.

Second, the reinforcement theory asserts that teacher motivation is influenced by the relationship between antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (Skinner, 1978). Accordingly, teachers' behaviors are shaped or maintained by consequences, which play a primary role in promoting targeted behaviors in teachers. Therefore, behaviors with positive consequences are likely to be repeated, whereas behaviors with negative consequences tend not to be repeated. In the traditional tenure-based pay system in

Vietnam, positive reinforcement or punishment are not strong enough to stimulate the desired behaviors of teachers nor weaken the undesired behaviors. For example, as public schools have a limited budget from state subsidies, they can only reward teachers by praise or small monetary rewards (Hallinger et al., 2017). These reinforcements are not able to stimulate teachers to contribute more effort and attain better performance. In addition, once teachers are officially recruited, their work position will be secured for life. Even when their performance is low, schools cannot easily dismiss them because this function is on DoET's exclusive authority. If teachers attain low performance, their salary and job security will not be primarily affected. Therefore, they tend to be passive in work and rarely put any special effort into teaching and learning. In contrast, the school in this study utilized its autonomy to develop teacher appraisal, and remuneration indicators are designed according to a school strategy and expected outcomes. If teachers exhibit desired behaviors, they will be rewarded in a timely manner by rising salary or bonus, and through praise or recognition. The findings of this study show that besides monetary incentives, the school especially pays attention to non-monetary incentives such as recognizing even small efforts and outcomes of teachers. However, if teachers display undesired or harmful behaviors, punishments can be apparent such as reduce salaries, cut bonuses, and even dismissal. Teachers understand that their small efforts every day could lead to changes in salary accordingly and even affect their job security. Therefore, this study found what has never been mentioned in previous studies in Vietnamese public schools, that performance-based salary as well as job security are essential to the work motivation of teachers in a public self-financed school.

Third, the performance-based pay system reflects key ideas of equity theory (Adam, 1963) and organization justice theory (Greenberg, 1987). Adam's equity theory asserts that teachers are motivated when they feel they are treated fairly. Greenberg

(1987) adds that organizational justice refers to teachers' perception of the extent to which management decisions and actions are fair in a school. Organizational justice consists of three dimensions, namely, procedural, distributive, and interactional justice (Greenberg, 1987). This study has not found clear evidence regarding interactional justice, which is the treatment that teachers receive as the result of managerial decisions (Colquitt, 2001). Next, this study reflects teachers' perception of procedural justice of the performance-based pay system. Procedural justice is defined as teachers' perception of the fairness of school management policies and procedures that relate to making managerial decisions (Colquitt, 2001). This study found that not all teachers agree with the procedure for teacher appraisal. They point out many limitations of the evaluation indicators. For instance, the school manages and evaluates teacher performance via their students' test scores, which could exacerbate achievement syndrome and negatively affect the goal of the students' competency development. Moreover, comparing students' test results among classes could not precisely reflect teachers' efforts because it might depend on other factors such as student capacity. However, in general, teachers are satisfied with the school's efforts in improving the teacher appraisal procedure toward more comprehensive and accurate results. They understand that as the appraisal system and performance-based pay have only been introduced in recent years, it will take more time to be improved. In comparison in regular public schools, for instance, teachers nationwide are evaluated by centrally determined indicators which are quite general and inappropriate to local and school features (Central Government, 2012b; MoET, 2018a). Sources of teacher appraisal are teacher self-assessment, peer-review of teacher groups, and the school leader's review (MoET, 2018a). In this study, the teacher appraisal system of Green School considers more indicators, such as students' test scores and students' reflections. Green School is one of few public secondary schools that deliver students'

feedback questionnaires twice per semester to explore students' responses to the work of teachers in classes. Although the accuracy of these reflections remains controversial, teachers believe strongly that taking students' opinions into account can reflect the teacher appraisal results more comprehensively. Teachers recognized that although each form of appraisal system has its strengths and weaknesses, the combination of these sources generates comprehensive and precise results. Last, distributive justice refers to teachers' perceptions of the fairness associated with managerial decisions regarding the distribution of resources in a school such as paying salaries and bonuses, and giving rewards (Colquitt, 2001). In other public schools, teacher salary is always fixed according to years of working experience, no matter how good individual teacher performance is. These schools have no budget to increase bonuses or rewards for good teachers. In contrast, school autonomy allows the school in this study to offer a well-deserved salary to teachers who have made great efforts and attained good performance. Teachers in this study strongly believe that if they do a good job, they will definitely be recognized and paid well regardless of their position or years of working experience. Therefore, performance-based pay contributes to increasing teachers' work motivation when they feel that the appraisal procedure and salary pay is accurate and fair. In short, school autonomy provides extensive freedom for the school to develop its procedure and make personnel decisions. Performance-based pay demonstrates three key typical features of a teacher appraisal and remuneration system in the school autonomy context, namely a tight connection between teachers' efforts, performance, and rewards, a clear reinforcement and punishment system, and a fair reward system. These features would be practical suggestions to overcome limitations and problems in the current teacher appraisal and remuneration system in public schools in Vietnam, which are reducing organizational justice and demotivating teachers.

Next, this study found that school autonomy is a good condition for promoting teachers' work motivation where changes and innovations associated with school autonomy have created meaningful work for teachers. The finding of this study illustrates the idea of Hackman & Oldham (1974) in a job characteristics model in which employees are motivated when the work includes several features such as requiring various competency requirements, generating meaningful results, covering stakeholders' needs, and working with a level of freedom. In this case, since the introduction of school-based curriculum development and the competency-based approach, the traditional roles of teachers have been significantly changed, and they must fulfill new tasks that require new competencies and skills. Therefore, teachers feel motivated when they can finish challenging tasks and create new products such as a subject curriculum, new learning projects, or new research projects. They are also very happy when their efforts can generate meaningful results such as exciting students with new teaching and learning methods, or students gaining greater success in learning. This study also indicates that greater extent of professional autonomy contributes to an increase in teachers' work motivation. However, this finding cannot be extrapolated to other regular public school teachers because teachers in this study were very active in working and offering support for changes. In addition, work can be only meaningful and stimulating to teachers when it is accompanied by a performance-based pay system, as mentioned above.

Last, one factor contributing to teachers' job satisfaction in the school autonomy context, which has been rarely mentioned in Vietnamese literature, is teacher collegiality. Many studies warned that school autonomy had made no impact (Ni, 2012; Wei et al., 2014) or had a negative impact on teacher collegiality and collaboration (Astiz, 2006; Short & Rinehart, 1992, Nir, 2002b). When working in the school autonomy context, teachers talk less about pedagogical issues, but about administrative complaints (Astiz,

2006) or school-based management associated with teacher empowerment is a source of school conflicts (Short & Rinehart, 1992). However, the findings of this study support previous studies in which school autonomy is a favorable environment to strengthen teacher-teacher relationships (Bezzina, 1989; Clune & White, 1988; White, 2016). Literature provides several explanations for this situation. Brandao (1995) argued that in a school-based management context, teachers can closely collaborate when being involved in making school-level decisions. Other authors explain that when teachers enjoy more professional autonomy and are involved in professional development, their mutual trust and bonding are strengthened (Bezzina, 1989; Clune & White, 1988; White, 2016; Hamilton Associates, 2015). The findings of the current study support the latter explanation since teachers in this study have extensive professional autonomy but low participation in school decisions. Particularly, one specific factor relating to teacher collegiality in the context of this study might be the value of collectivism in Vietnamese culture which emphasizes cooperation, mutual support, and harmony in one organization (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014). Furthermore, when working in a high school autonomy context and with great teacher professional autonomy, teachers have more chances to work together to solve new instructional practices like school-based curriculum development or a competency-based approach. Teacher collegiality has strongly focused on improving educational practice and developing teachers' professionalism. Inter-subject learning, for instance, is a good chance for teachers from different subject groups to work together and learn from each other. Since teachers feel happy and satisfied when working with competent, creative, enthusiastic, and like-minded colleagues, they have more significant work motivation. This finding further supports previous studies in the school autonomy context that teacher collegiality is one essential factor contributing to teachers' job satisfaction (Cannata & Penazola, 2012; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Miron &

Applegate, 2007; Miron & Gary, 2000). Next, opponents of performance-based pay argue that this system could result in competitive behaviors among teachers (Loeb & Myung, 2010). Finally, the finding of this study shows that school autonomy and performance-based pay do not damage teacher collegiality since appraisal indicators are transparent and teachers are treated according to their obtained performance rather than their ranking with colleagues. Competition might exist, but teachers make efforts for the purpose of demonstrating their competencies and obtaining better results in their work rather than to become outstanding or get a higher ranking than others. Teachers believe that if they try their best and obtain good results, they will get deserved remuneration.

Increasing teachers' workload and work-related stress.

This study found that school autonomy has led to an increase in teachers' workload and work-related stress. Teachers in this study had to cope with a greater workload and more complicated tasks than their colleagues in regular public schools. These findings match those observed in earlier studies on the huge workload of teachers working in many school autonomy contexts when they have longer work hours or must deal with demanding or intensive tasks (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Roch & Sai, 2017; Duyar, Ras, & Pearson, 2015; Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Ni, 2012; T. T. H. Lee, Cheng, & Ko, 2017; Oberfield, 2016). This study identified four sources of work-related stress for teachers working in the school autonomy context, namely teachers' professional autonomy, school's requirements, administrative tasks, and maintaining harmonious relationships with students' parents. First, increased professional autonomy might be detrimental in terms of increasing teachers' workload. As all teachers are first-timers in developing a school-based curriculum or implementing the competency-based approach, they must spend a large amount of time in exploring and experimenting without any external guidance or support. These school educational changes also require teachers to

invest more time and effort making significant changes at the classroom level. Greater teacher professional autonomy is associated with higher accountability to the school and to parents. To realize innovative ideas in teaching and learning, teachers must submit many documents and explanations to school managers and especially governing bodies. This bureaucratization of the teaching profession is in line with the finding of earlier studies on the work of teachers in the school autonomy context (Ball, 2003; Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Gawlik, 2007). Second, the school imposes many requirements for teachers in teaching and learning, in professional development, and in working with students, colleagues, and parents. Teachers reflected that the enormous challenge for them is always being forced to be innovative in their work. Therefore, teachers must always do their best and try harder to improve their work. This feature might be linked to a school value of encouraging innovations, which will be discussed in the next section. Although these requirements might be common in other schools, pressures on teachers in a school autonomy context seem to be more considerable because if teachers are not able to satisfy one of these requirements, they could suffer a decreased salary or be sacked. Moreover, since the school nurtures the culture of no student left behind, teachers must spend more working time and pay more attention to supporting students with low academic performance. This feature supports the finding of Lake et al. (2010) that in charter schools maintaining the 'No Excuses' model with a strong emphasis on the success of students, teachers are required to work longer hours, take demanding tasks, and support students at any time of day. Third, the administrative tasks are another source of stress for teachers where they must spend much time fulfilling administrative requirements and documentation. This finding is consistent with much previous research which revealed that school autonomy generally increased workload and the bureaucratic responsibilities for teachers (Brandao, 1995; Cheung & Kan, 2009; Corwin & Flaherty, 1995; Gropello,

2006; Ni, 2012; Nir, 2002a, 2002b; Wylie, 1997). Despite enjoying extensive autonomy in many areas, the school in this study had to maintain a paper-based system of administrative management like other regular public schools under the DoET, with the BoET's governance ensuring unified monitoring and control. The management system has been manual, outdated, and time-consuming while governing bodies have laid down many strict rules regarding its operation. The experiment of the administration computer app in recent years has doubled teacher workload at a time because they must operate both the paper-based and computer-based system. This situation leads to reduced teacher job satisfaction and negatively affected their professional tasks. In this study, one specific reason attributed to the increased paperwork of teachers, which has not been mentioned in previous studies, is the intense scrutiny of governing bodies. Generally, governing bodies in Vietnam have great authority to frequently check various types of teacher documents (Saito & Tsukui, 2008) and carry out ad hoc checks on teachers' work (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2015). Since the school implements many educational changes of which governing bodies have limited experience, teachers are required to report and be always accountable for their work to governing bodies, and thus, they must cope with daunting administrative tasks. Last, teachers must endure extreme stress when they are responsible to parents for student performance and must maintain good relationships with them. In the context of an exam-oriented education, parents do not care much about invisible gains like competency or skills development but test scores only. Therefore, the biggest challenge to subject teachers, especially those who are teaching key subjects, is how to improve students' test scores. As homeroom teachers, they must act as a diplomat who represents the school and maintains good relationships between the school and parents. Their work is more complex and challenging than other colleagues in regular public schools since parents' contributions are the main source of the school budget and parents

set higher requirements for schools and teachers. Therefore, teachers must deal with problems carefully without causing any friction with parents that might ruin the school's reputation.

Teacher turnover was not an alarming issue to the school in this study since most research participants asserted that they were not concerned about their contract-based position. However, research data reflected a higher turnover rate in this school than that of traditional public schools in Vietnam. This finding supports previous literature, which generally showed a high turnover of teachers working in the school autonomy context (Cetinkaya, 2016; Miron & Applegate, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Stuit & Smith, 2012; Wylie, 1997). Interestingly, the reason underlying teacher turnover in this study is different from that found in earlier studies. Previous research indicated that some factors of working conditions in the school autonomy contexts could influence teachers' decision to leave, namely low salaries, school governance, school resources, and high workload (Miron & Applegate, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2000; Roch & Sai, 2017; Stuit & Smith, 2012). However, evidence of these reasons was not detected in this study. The study found that teacher turnover had no attribution to work-related stress or job dissatisfaction. The most crucial reason for teachers' leaving in this study was the sense of low job stability and security. Most Green School teachers are holding contract-based instead of tenure-based positions. As Vietnamese culture especially is especially concerned with the value of stability in work and life, teachers are willing to leave a satisfying job in Green School to obtain a secure tenured position in other regular public schools. Moreover, the strict requirements of the school on teacher work and pressure from the performance-based pay system cause stress and a sense of instability when teachers might experience decreased salary or be sacked at any time. The finding of this study is in agreement with a previous study concluding that Vietnamese teachers prefer working in regular public

schools to secure a permanent job position (T. H. Pham, 2008). This study further proves that a stable and secure job is a crucial need for public school teachers, and its lack might lead to their decision to leave.

The finding of this study corroborates Herzberg's two-factor theory that the motivation of employees is influenced by hygiene factors like pay, job security, working conditions, relationships, and motivating factors like meaningful work, responsibility, influence, advancement, and recognition (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Herzberg & Zautra, 1976). This study proves that in the context of public self-financed schools in Vietnam, job security is the most crucial factor that leads to teachers' decision to leave. Therefore, job security and teacher retention should be matters of concern for public self-financed schools where they have no autonomy to set tenure quotas or manage tenure-based employees but rather this being the domain of the local governing bodies in the field of personnel like DoHA or BoHA. However, if the school were granted autonomy to set up more tenure-based positions, the school budget would suffer increased financial pressure. Other teachers might become demoralized like their peers in regular public schools where their position was secured for life. Therefore, it is suggested that public self-financed schools should maintain a contract-based mechanism in parallel with improving other motivating factors to increase teacher retention.

The Impacts of School Autonomy on School Culture

Students first.

The fourth sub-research question is concerned with how school autonomy makes changes to school culture. The finding of this research shows that the most critical feature of the public self-financed school is a strong emphasis on serving students, who are regarded as important customers of the school. This school value is presented via specific aspects such as respecting student autonomy, putting students' wellbeing as the first

priority, making every effort to ensure students' success, and supporting low-performing students. This value echoes the concept of schools as a human service organization in which schools and teachers play a crucial role in enhancing the success and well-being of students (John & Owen 2005; Hasenfeld, 1983). First, the school always encourages students' participation in school activities and grants them significant autonomy in planning and organizing these activities. Students have chances to voice their opinions, and their opinions are fully respected. These findings are sharply different from common practices in other public schools in Vietnam which a hierarchical student-teacher relationship is maintained and teachers are the key decision-makers in most school activities relating to students (Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; P. M. Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005; T. H. Nguyen, 2017). The current study found that when being granted extensive autonomy and encouraged to be creative, students can promote their potential capacity and make significant contributions to the school. The school in this study did not only grant student autonomy but also provided necessary guidance and support for students to develop their capacity and be able to exercise autonomy such as training courses, club activities, and teachers' guidance. However, the study does not find evidence relating to student autonomy in teaching and learning or their participation in school policy development.

The school value of encouraging student autonomy is rooted in a school philosophy that highlights the active role of students in the education process. Every student has a distinctive capacity and creativity, and the role of teachers should be stimulating, advising, and supporting students. The more actively students are involved in school activities, the more experience and skills they can gain. Another possible explanation is that in the context of school autonomy, the school must utilize all its available resources, and students are considered as a valuable resource to be mobilized.

Moreover, student autonomy is recognized as an essential need of students that the school must respond to. As most students in Green School were brilliant and active, they had a strong desire to demonstrate capacities in most areas of school activities. In the context of this study, if teachers fully cover and prepare for all tasks, students might feel unsatisfied. This study also shows that a democratic school environment and friendly student-teacher relationship are favorable conditions that facilitate student autonomy.

The findings of this study corroborate the idea of self-determination theory which is concerned with nurturing students' intrinsic motivation via fostering their autonomy, competencies, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). According to the theory, student motivation is influenced by the student-teacher relationship and the classroom climate established by teachers. This study proves that when going to school, students have not only the need for learning but also the need for autonomy. Therefore, the school and teachers should adopt an autonomy-supportive style to promote intrinsic motivation and develop capacity. This finding might be a useful suggestion for other public schools in Vietnam which undervalue the capacity and autonomy of students in school participation. However, granting student autonomy must take consideration of conditions such as student capacity and activeness, and student-teacher relationships. In addition, this study suggests that school programs and policies to enhance student capacity are necessary when granting student autonomy.

Second, this study found that school autonomy in association with test-oriented education could invigorate the spirit of dedication of the students. This finding is likely to be typical in the context of test-oriented education like in Vietnam. The school in this study puts students at the highest priority, gives them the best education quality and care. In terms of students' academic achievement, the school and teachers have made every effort to best prepare for tests and exams. In every situation, the school always puts the

benefits of students as its first concern. The study found that even when teachers encountered many challenges and difficulties in teaching conditions, they always tried their best to overcome these problems and bring the best education to students. The school value of commitment to students is especially represented by their treatment of low-performing students. The school pays special attention to these students and finds specific solutions for them. Supporting low-performing students is considered a shared responsibility of all teachers. In short, students' success is the highest goal of the school, and all teachers show a strong commitment to that goal. However, most pieces of evidence relate to teacher commitments to students' performance in tests and exams only. Being a self-financed school with the primary income coming from students' tuition fees and being influenced by a test-oriented education system, the school and teachers have no alternative but to become concerned with students' test results. The success of students further enhances school prestige and brings high security for its ability to attract prospective students in the future. Focusing on students' success is also a way for the school to increase parents' satisfaction when their ultimate concern is their children's test scores. Besides, Green School might also be under pressure from its governing bodies that expect the school to be always excellent and high performing. In addition, as the number of low-performing students in Green School is fewer than that of other public schools, it could invest more time and resources for supporting these students. More importantly, under the performance-based system, students test scores are one crucial factor contributing to teacher appraisal results. Therefore, teachers must try their best to support students to attain the highest test results as an indirect way to increase their performance results. It could be argued that this school value might be detrimental in terms of exacerbating 'teaching and learning to the test' situations and increase teachers' stress.

The school as a learning organization.

The findings of this study show that when enjoying a higher level of school autonomy, the school is characterized by the typical values of a learning organization. This finding echoes the theory of learning organization that learning and work are integrated in an ongoing and systematic manner to promote continuous improvements of the organization (Senge, 1990). In this study, the school as a learning organization is presented via three levels: individual teachers, teacher groups, and the school. At the individual level, teachers have a strong passion for learning and actively study by themselves. These findings illustrate the personal mastery aspect of a learning organization, in which individuals commit to lifelong learning (Senge, 1990). The study identified three primary sources of learning motivation for teachers in the context of school autonomy, namely personal passion, students' needs, and the influence of external forces. This finding regarding teachers' learning motivations in the school autonomy context is sharply contrasted to that in regular public schools in Vietnam where teachers have low motivation for professional development (Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Saito, Tsukui, & Tanaka, 2008). In this study, teachers regardless of age or working experience, have an energetic eagerness for learning, which is both a great passion and personal need. They consider learning as not a required task but an essential part of their teaching work. They perceive a fundamental need for learning every day and feel happy when involved in learning activities. Daily school practices are wonderful opportunities to learn and develop professional competencies since they can learn from reading, and observing, sharing and exchanging with colleagues and even students. Learning and professional development are also ways to maintain teachers' prestige. This motivation reflects a Vietnamese cultural feature that puts particular emphasis on personal prestige and reputation (T. Nguyen, 2015). Moreover, teachers in this study perceive a strong learning

need is rooted in their teaching relationship with students. As students in the school are quite intelligent and eager to learn, teachers must continuously learn to respond to the needs and expectations of students. Notably, this study shows that school autonomy and its associated practices can influence teacher learning motivation. Recent school changes such as performance-based pay, school-based curriculum development, and the competency-based approach are all generating pressure and momentum for teachers to be involved in professional development activities. This new practice requires teachers to continually learn and update their knowledge if they want to maintain their work. This research finding further confirms the idea of Y. C. Cheng & Cheung (2003) that the success of school-based management depends on the self-learning of schoolteachers.

At the group level, teaching observation is the most popular form of learning between teachers of one professional group. One positive feature of teacher professional development in the school is that teaching observation does not aim to judge teachers' teaching, but puts a strong emphasis on improving the learning of students. In addition, as every teacher is a unique source of expertise and experience, all teachers from any professional group can feel free to share their professional problems and get useful advice from colleagues. Teachers are willing to learn from their colleagues on the one hand and to support others on the other hand. Mutual support between teachers has created a strong learning community where every teacher is both an active learner and a mentor.

At the school level, the school frequently creates learning opportunities for all teachers. In the context of school autonomy, teacher professional development has an active link to the school's development strategy. Developing teachers' professionally is considered a critical measure towards realizing school visions. Teachers in this study have many opportunities to participate in training courses, and they are facilitated to take higher degrees. Especially, the school grants significant autonomy to teacher groups to

organize training activities at the group level. The teachers' need-based training allows teachers to deal with the specific needs of school and teachers. The decentralization of professional groups is also a school strategy to encourage collaboration and learning in a group. This school practice is mostly different from that of other public schools in which a top-down approach is maintained in professional development and there is no school budget for school-based training activities.

Furthermore, the school utilized its extensive autonomy to establish appropriate systems to promote learning in the school. Many key indicators of the performance-based pay system refer to teachers' learning efforts, such as attendance in professional development activities and products from professional development activities. This system contributes to highlighting the importance of teacher professional competencies when evaluating teacher performance rather than other factors, which might be more common in other public schools, such as maintaining a good relationship with school leaders. Additionally, school autonomy in finance also allows the school to design its cost norms to support teachers' learning, such as covering tuition fees and giving a bonus to those who enroll in post-graduate courses. The school also facilitates effective procedures to encourage information and experience sharing within the school to expand good practices and promote interactions and exchange between teachers such as group discussions, training sessions, or teacher presentations. Professional exchanges and mentoring within the school are also an essential factor contributing to teachers' professional development in the school autonomy context (Fryer, 2012; Gleason, 2017). These opportunities contribute to improving a mental model of a learning organization, which is the capacity of individuals to scrutinize and share their own thinking and ideas (Senge, 1990).

One noticeable feature of school as a learning organization at the school level is that the school connects well with the external environment to promote school learning. This study contributed significant findings in terms of school collaboration, which have not received much attention in Vietnamese literature. The school considered cooperation as a strategy to promote learning and to share good practices. As learning is the main purpose of school cooperation, the school tends to find cooperation opportunities with schools that share similar features or development strategies. In addition, the school actively learns and adopts good practices from its school partners with an apparent aim to improve school practices and increase teacher capacity. These features reflect forms of knowledge acquisition in organizational learning such as learning from observing other schools and adapting what others are doing (G. P. Huber, 1996). In addition, this study added that sharing is also another form of learning when the school does not only passively learn from its partners but also share its knowledge with others and inspires others with its unique values. The result of this study further supports the previous finding that school autonomy is a good opportunity to strengthen school-to-school collaboration (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996; Hamilton Associates, 2015; OECD, 2013; Pont et al., 2008). It could be concluded that in the context of school autonomy in Vietnam, the schools established collaborative networks for professional exchange and staff development rather than administrative or political matters (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996; Pont et al., 2008).

The school in this study is featured as a learning organization because it maintained the value of encouraging the new ideas of teachers, particularly of young teachers. It creates equal opportunities for all teachers, especially for the young, to be involved in challenging work to develop their professional capacity. In addition, the school offers its young teachers not only self-development opportunities but also systems

of support, guidance, and mutual feedback. Young teachers are trusted as the most important actors in supporting changes and experimenting with new approaches. Therefore, facilitating and supporting young teachers, and assigning them challenging tasks are effective strategies to develop teacher professionalism and to realize school visions.

The findings of the current study are consistent with previous literature indicating that becoming a learning organization is one dominant feature contributing to the success of public schools in the school autonomy context (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; E. C. K. Cheng, 2017). Therefore, developing schools towards becoming learning organizations and facilitating collaborative learning would be practical suggestions from this study for Vietnamese public schools when turning to a higher level of school autonomy. However, this study revealed that the success of schools as learning organizations depends on two factors. First, this study is in line with earlier theories that to transform to a learning organization successfully, the school and teachers must share a clear vision of learning towards developing teachers' capacity and finally improving students' learning (Senge, 1990, Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003). Second, the school leader must play a crucial role in inspiring, cultivating, and managing learning activities (E. C. K. Cheng, 2017; D. H. L. Lee & Chiu, 2017). However, principals in public schools would encounter enormous challenges when developing their schools as learning organizations. For instance, instructional leadership is not the central concern of most Vietnamese principals, rather it is managerial and political roles (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2014), and their creativity is primarily restricted by regulations and higher governing authority (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Hallinger & Walker, 2017).

Being different from others.

The findings of this research showed that one typical school value in the school autonomy context which was a strong aspiration for diversity and difference, particularly at the individual and at the school level. At the individual level, teachers are encouraged to develop and promote their ‘colors’ such as unique personal strengths, expertise, experiences, ideas, style, and qualification. On the one hand, teachers in this study were confident with and proud of their unique colors. They have a strong desire to express their colors with a clear purpose of improving their teaching rather than merely showing off their unique features. On the other hand, teachers recognized and respected the different identities of their colleagues in one school community. They considered those differences as a useful source for learning and developing professional competencies. Interestingly, when observing and applying good practices from colleagues, they are likely to adapt their own experience rather than copy exactly. Promoting personal identities seems to be in contrast to Vietnamese traditional culture and the culture of public organizations that put more emphasis on organizational collectivism and similarity rather than individual differences (Hallinger & D. T. Truong, 2016; Phan & Locke, 2016). Generally, in an organization, employees rarely present their individual characteristics and tend to act collectively to avoid conflict and judgment. However, in the context of school autonomy, the school considers every teacher an essential resource of the school community, and the development of the school depends on the combined strength of individual teachers. The more diverse the values teachers, the more diverse and stronger the school will be. Therefore, teachers feel confident promoting their strengths as their unique contribution to school development. This finding reflects the theory of Cheng (1993) that school-based management highlights human initiatives and exploits all possibilities for the development of school members. In addition, in this case, when working with many

excellent colleagues, teachers might feel that being a good teacher is not enough, but that they must prove their unique strengths and values. As the performance-based pay system takes account of students' reflections, teachers have a strong motivation to express their distinctive values to attract attention and get support from students. Lastly, a high level of teacher autonomy allows them to realize their innovative ideas and foster personal identities. Nevertheless, this study did not find strong evidence regarding the teacher groups' identities at the group level because the transition seems to be in its infant phase. Teachers can work together in professional groups, but most of them have no clear idea of creating distinctive group identities. The school principal has just recently initiated the vision of teacher group identities. However, since there has been no tangible reward or benefits to teachers, they have little motivation to contribute to group values.

At the school level, this study found that school autonomy has a strong influence on school culture since the school has a clear vision of creating and promoting distinctive values. Great freedom and autonomy have facilitated the school to realize this vision. The most prominent distinctive values of the school compared to other regular public schools are that the school operates as a learning organization, respecting professional competencies and teacher professional autonomy, respecting student autonomy, and committing to further the quality of education and students' success. This finding echoes the idea that school-based management is characterized by a strong and unique organizational culture (Cheng, 1993).

The value of being distinct from others has two clear goals. The first one is to improve education quality and better satisfy students' needs. For example, the introduction of school-based education programs, which contained unique school features, had a strong aim to provide a better educational experience for students. Moreover, developing school identities had a close link to increasing school

competitiveness. Being a public self-financed school, the school seemed to be less competitive than other regular public schools insofar as its students must contribute tuition fees instead of being covered by state subsidies. Therefore, the school must create its unique values to gain competitive advantages in attracting students. This finding illustrates the idea of Schein (2016) that school culture can stand out as one component for the attainment of competitive advantage. One might be concerned that school autonomy might facilitate opportunistic behaviors to increase the school budget at all costs. However, the finding of this study confirmed that when enjoying autonomy, the school budget was not the ultimate goal of the school. It can even reduce its admission quotas and accept a large reduction in its budget in order to commit to the goals of the competency-based approach. The school used its autonomy to create unique values and improve school quality. Then the school used its quality and cultural values to attract students and raise its budget. This study suggests that other public schools should adopt this approach when enjoying a higher level of school autonomy.

The value of being different from other schools is further invigorated by another school value of supporting changes. This finding confirms the previous result that school autonomy is a favorable environment for initiating and nurturing new ideas (Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Chubb & Moe, 1999; Dillon, 2011; Lubienski, 2003; Thompson et al., 2016; White, 1992; Wohlstetter et al., 1995). School autonomy allows the school in this study great freedom and flexibility to realize innovative changes such as school-based curriculum development, competency-based assessment, and performance-based pay. The current research adds that when school autonomy is accompanied by self-financed status, the school has considerable momentum to make significant changes. As the school receives no subsidy from the state budget, it must exploit all resources and possibilities for school improvement and effectiveness. The school in this study nurtured the value of

encouraging teachers to continually make changes to their work and share their good innovative practice. Creating innovations became a core school value and contributed to the school's reputation because if teachers are not able to innovate, the school cannot maintain its leading role in education innovation and might lose its attraction to prospective students. Teachers in this study were somewhat familiar with constant changes in school practices and were likely to support changes. This feature is different from the traditional culture in Vietnam, which highlights stability in organizations (Doan, 2005; Ngo, Bulte, et al., 2017; T. Q. N. Nguyen, 2016). Besides, the school's innovations and its distinctive values are supported by the value of a learning organization, which helps teachers strengthen their professional capacity to realize changes effectively. This study also proved that promoting distinctive school values did not ruin school-to-school collaboration as previous studies warned (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996; Thompson et al., 2016). The school in this study promoted collaboration and kept on collaborating, learning, and exchanging positive values with other schools. However, the study found that the differences resulting from school autonomy are significant barriers to the school in finding suitable partners and maintaining collaborative relationships. The difference between performance-based pay and tenure-based pay, for instance, limits schools in exchanging good practices in teaching and learning or teacher professional development. Therefore, promoting distinctive school values on the one hand and maintaining effective school collaboration, on the other hand, would be a remarkable challenge to public schools when enjoying autonomy.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces a substantive theory of school autonomy in the specific context of a Vietnamese public secondary school. The chapter discussed research findings which emerged from this study together with those represented in the literature. In terms

of the impacts of school autonomy on educational processes, key research findings are an increase in school responsiveness to students' needs, changes of teaching and learning practices at the classroom level, and heightened tensions between the school and governing bodies. Regarding school structure, school autonomy results in a high principal autonomy but a weak school council authority in making school-level decisions. Teachers enjoy more professional autonomy but low participation in decisions concerning school finance and personnel issues. School autonomy contributes to higher teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction, but teachers must deal with enhanced workload and work-related stress. Finally, school autonomy leads to establish school cultural values such as giving priority to students, developing the school as a learning organization, and encouraging distinctive values at individual, group, and school levels.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The primary aims of this chapter is to synthesize conclusions drawn from research findings and suggest implications. The conclusions highlight the positive and negative impacts of school autonomy on various aspects of a school, particularly school education processes, school structure, teachers, and school culture. Necessary conditions and interventions to gain benefits from school autonomy are also discussed in this chapter. The conclusions are followed by suggestions to improve policy and school management practices in Vietnam and recommendations for further research.

Conclusions

Positive Impacts of School Autonomy

The current study provided strong evidence that school autonomy might be beneficial to many areas of a school. In terms of education processes, this study found that school autonomy could result in various positive impacts such as improving school responsiveness to students' needs and improving teaching and learning practices at the classroom level. When enjoying greater freedom, the school made every effort to investigate and satisfy the various learning needs of students. Under a test-oriented education system, the ultimate learning needs of students found in this study were learning to get good test scores and to prepare for high-stakes exams. Besides this, students had a strong need to experience diverse educational activities outside academic programs and to develop their potential social skills and competencies. School autonomy allowed the school to offer a unique school-based curriculum that contains the basic program, advanced program, and co-curricular activities. Although the school could not make substantial changes to the basic program due to barriers from the national curriculum frame, school autonomy allowed it to develop diverse advanced and co-

curricular programs. During the school-based curriculum development process, the school and teachers took special consideration of the specific features and needs of students. Therefore, it tried to offer many options and programs to meet the diverse needs of students. Noticeably, when maintaining the goal of teaching and learning to the test, the school turned more attention to non-core subjects and the goal of students' competency development. In short, this study suggests that students could be beneficiaries of the school-based curriculum, and teachers should enjoy higher autonomy in curriculum development.

School autonomy in curriculum development and education enabled teachers to experiment with new teaching and learning methods, which are rarely applied in regular public schools, such as project-based learning, blended learning, or inter-subject learning. School autonomy also supported a gradual transition in teaching and learning from the teacher-centered approach, which is prevalent in Vietnamese public schools, to the student-centered approach. Thanks to flexibility in curriculum structure and teaching and learning schedules, teachers could spend more time on other learning objectives such as developing students' competencies. Although these practices were in their initial phase, the study suggests that when schools have autonomy in education and teachers enjoy greater professional autonomy, they were able to make significant improvements at the classroom level. Most remarkably, data-driven instruction was employed as a strategy to monitor students' progress, to investigate teaching and learning problems, to guide teaching practice, and to thoroughly prepare for high-stake exams. Presenting student performance was also the primary form of school accountability to parents and governing bodies for school quality. However, this practice might affect the ultimate goal of data-driven instruction and exacerbate teaching and learning to the test. It could also increase

stress on teachers when students' test scores become one crucial indicator reflecting their teaching performance.

Second, in terms of school structure, the most positive impact of school autonomy recognized in this study was extensive teacher autonomy over professional matters, which was much higher than for their peers in other regular public schools. At the teacher group level, the school strongly decentralized autonomy to lead teachers and member teachers in school-based curriculum development, educational activities, and teacher' professional development. Therefore, lead teachers and member teachers became more active and less dependent on the direction of school principals. At the classroom level, teachers were encouraged to maximize the use of their professional autonomy to experiment with new teaching and learning methods or forms of assessment. This study showed that when granted autonomy, teachers could explore their inherent creativity and competencies to fulfill assigned tasks and to improve teaching and learning practices. Therefore, this study supported the link between school autonomy, teacher autonomy, and education improvements at the classroom level.

Next, changes resulting from school autonomy contributed to an increase in teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction. Key factors contributing to teacher job satisfaction in the school autonomy context investigated in this study are good pay, job security, recognition, meaningful work, and teacher collegiality. Performance-based pay was used as a strategy to link teachers' performance appraisal to their remuneration. Teachers felt satisfied when their performance was accurately recognized, and the salary was more competitive than that in regular public schools. Performance-based pay is in contrast to the tenure-based pay where teachers' job position are secured for life and the salary is fixed according to years of working experience.

Performance-based pay motivates teachers by a strong belief that if they make efforts and attain excellent performance, they will receive respective rewards. They also highly appreciated the accuracy of the appraisal results and received increased salaries. The participants in this study were aware of a clear connection between their daily effort, their received salary, their job security, and the long-term future of the school. Therefore, they were strongly motivated to work for gaining higher salaries and maintaining their job security. Besides, teachers were satisfied with non-monetary incentives and recognition from school leaders. New education practices associated with school autonomy, such as school-based curriculum development and competency-based approach motivated teachers when they could be involved in meaningful works and develop new skills. Further, although the work environment in a school autonomy context was quite competitive in terms of professional rivalries, the findings of this study showed that school autonomy and performance-based pay did not damage teacher collegiality. All appraisal indicators were transparent, and teachers were treated according to their obtained performance rather than their ranking with colleagues. Teachers felt happy and satisfied with collegiality in the school where their colleagues were willing to offer support regarding work and professional development.

Finally, the current study showed that school autonomy could make the most significant changes in school culture. The most salient feature of the school culture investigated in this study was the value of serving students. This school value is presented via specific features such as respecting student autonomy, putting students' benefits as the priority, making every effort towards student success, and supporting low-performance students. In contrast to Vietnamese traditional culture which undervalues the role of students in the student-teacher relationship, the school in this study granted student autonomy to participate in school activities and respected students' voices in planning and

organizing these activities. Student autonomy was recognized as an essential need of students that the school must respond to and respect. This study proved that when enjoying greater autonomy, students can explore their creativity and make a significant contribution to the school. Next, due to the influence of test-oriented education and student performance as the primary form of school accountability, the school and teachers made every effort to attain the highest performance.

School autonomy was recognized as a favorable condition to promote organizational learning and establish a learning community. In the present study, the role of school as a learning organization was demonstrated via the three levels of individual teachers, teacher groups, and the school. In contrast to teachers in regular public schools, participants in this study showed a strong passion for learning and active involvement in learning activities. Three main learning motivations of teachers in the context of school autonomy were a personal passion, students' needs, and school requirements. At the group level, teachers learn through teaching observation and informal mentoring. Teachers were willing to learn from their colleagues on the one hand and to support others on the other hand. At the school level, the school frequently created learning opportunities for teachers and decentralized high autonomy to teachers groups to implement teachers' need-based training. Besides, school autonomy in personnel and finance allowed the school to establish systems and procedures supporting learning within the school and exchanging good practices with other schools.

In a school autonomy context, the school tended to encourage diversity and difference, particularly at the individual and school level. In contrast to Vietnamese culture that encourages collectivism and homogeneity, teachers in this study were encouraged to promote their unique 'colors,' such as unique strengths, expertise, experiences, ideas, style, and qualifications. The school considered every teacher an

essential resource of the school community and the development of the school depended on the strength of individual teachers. Therefore, teachers felt confident to promote their strengths as their unique contribution to school development. At the school level, the school had a clear vision of creating and promoting distinctive values with views to increase school competitiveness, improve education quality, and better satisfy students' needs. This school value was further nurtured by other values such as encouraging changes and innovations and developing the school as a learning organization.

The present study found that school autonomy could bring benefits to a school only when necessary supporting conditions and interventions accompanied it. Firstly, concerning human resources, the most decisive factor for the success of school autonomy was the quality of teaching staff. As school-based curriculum development and the competency-based approach were new practices to most public schools, teachers needed to be well prepared and ready for educational changes. Besides, this study highlighted the role of the school principal in planning and leading school changes, developing management systems, and facilitating innovations. Secondly, the success of school autonomy required a sufficient financial resource to cover new expenditures such as curriculum development, co-curricular activities, inter-subject learning, and school-based professional development. There was a need for an appropriate teacher appraisal and remuneration system to evaluate and pay teachers accurately. Thirdly, school autonomy was nurtured in a community with cultural values like eagerness for learning, supporting diversity within a school, facilitating young teachers, and encouraging innovative ideas. Finally, school autonomy was influenced by external factors like the support of students' parents and the intervention of local governing bodies.

Negative Impacts of School Autonomy

In spite of its stated benefits, school autonomy might be detrimental to the school and teachers since it could result in some negative consequences, and for this reason it should be advanced with great caution. Regarding educational processes, school autonomy could be harmful in exacerbating teaching and learning to the test. The school in this study utilized autonomy in the academic sphere to increase instructional time with a strong emphasis on preparing for high-stakes exams and developing a curriculum with a strong emphasis on key subjects. This curriculum structure reflected a typical test-oriented education in Vietnam, and even schools with academic autonomy must accept this as an unavoidable tendency. Moreover, school autonomy was recognized as a chief factor heightening tensions between the school and governing bodies. The top-down approach and forceful intervention of governing bodies conflicted with the freedom and autonomy of the school. Since governing bodies kept a conservative mindset and did not keep up to date with constant changes in school practice, they did not support changes and improvements at both classroom and school level and turned much attention to administrative rather than professional supervision. The tight scrutiny of governing bodies increased teachers' administrative tasks and was reported to be the primary source of their stress.

Second, concerning school structure, this study revealed that school autonomy significantly increased the school principal's autonomy, whereas the school council, teachers, and parents contributed only weak voices in most school-level decisions. Because there is no specific regulation on school structure for public schools with high autonomy, the school in this study maintained the most typical feature of a regular public school structure which highlights the crucial role of the school principal in exercising both political and bureaucratic authority. The presence of the Communist Party also

weakened the voice of the school council and other stakeholders. On the one hand, as the school must face many unprecedented challenges, and the school principal needs to have more autonomy and responsibilities to deal with them. On the other hand, the authority of the school council in this study was limited since council members were lacking expertise and experience needed to be involved in the collective decision-making process. Making collective decisions in a school council is rather difficult when the Vietnamese organizational culture highlights the value of harmony. Members in a council tend to accept other opinions to avoid potential tensions and conflicts. Teachers were too busy with professional tasks and lacked time to be involved in school management matters. For these practical reasons, the school council was not able to play a significant role in school management, even when the school had greater autonomy. Another school structure problem in the school autonomy context would be that when lead teachers were granted higher autonomy, they might misuse their authority or mistreat teacher members.

Third, although teachers showed a high job satisfaction when working in this school, the most noticeable impact of school autonomy on teachers was an increase in workload and work-related stress. Most teachers working in this study hold a labor contract instead of a secured tenure position, and their salaries were performance-based. Moreover, they must shoulder a higher workload and more complicated tasks than their colleagues in regular public schools. Four sources of work-related stress on teachers working in the school autonomy context were teachers' professional autonomy, school's requirements, administrative tasks, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with students' parents. Current education practices such as school-based curriculum development, competency-based approach, and new teaching and learning methods were enormous challenges to teachers who had no previous experience in these fields. Teachers were required to continually learn and do their best to meet requirements from new tasks.

Higher professional autonomy was accompanied by greater responsibilities and accountability to the school, students, parents, and governing bodies. Teachers' salaries and job positions were not always secured because they depended on their performance. A considerable number of administrative tasks and intense scrutiny of governing bodies caused much stress to teachers. In short, working in a school autonomy context could be not appropriate for all teachers, especially those who preferred a stable and less competitive work environment.

Finally, public schools should be aware of several potential disadvantages when enjoying a higher level of school autonomy. Becoming public self-financed schools, they would be less competitive than other regular public schools because students must contribute higher tuition fees instead of being covered by state subsidy. Therefore, schools must face more challenges over creating school values to increase competitive advantages towards attracting more prospective students. Moreover, the distinctive school features resulting from school autonomy were significant obstacles for the school in finding suitable school partners and maintaining collaborative relationships at both individual teacher and school level.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for Policy

First of all, this study pointed out that the current national curriculum in Vietnam was limited in terms of responding to the diverse learning needs of schools and students. It maintained an overwhelming body of theoretical knowledge which put a strong emphasis on knowledge and test-taking skill objectives while ignoring other learning and social skills and competency development. Imposing a one-size-fits-all curriculum and a rigid teaching and learning schedule nationwide has been found inappropriate for application to schools with different backgrounds, goals, practices, and student features.

Therefore, the new national curriculum is expected to overcome these limitations. This study did not support granting full autonomy to schools and teachers in curriculum development due to the current limitations on school resources and teacher capacity. However, schools and teachers should be involved in the curriculum and textbook development process to take advantage of their experience and recommendations. They should be granted greater freedom to develop school-based education programs such as co-curricular or optional courses.

Second, the findings of the current study showed that high-stakes exams were the most severe obstacle to implementing school-based curriculum and other educational innovations. As the current high-stakes exams place a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge, teachers and students try to memorize knowledge and hone test-taking skills. In a test-oriented education, if there are no changes in high-stakes exams, schools will keep teaching and learning to the test while students have no chance to explore their other potential capacities. Currently, MoET and some universities are experimenting with a new admission procedure that considers many factors, such as academic performance record, social activities record, portfolio, recommendation letters, and motivation letters. This form of admission would reduce pressure from the high-stakes national exam and make schools turn more attention to other aspects of school education.

Third, greater autonomy requires a more comprehensive school accountability system to ensure that autonomy is exercised correctly and avoid opportunistic behaviors. Although MoET issued some legislative documents such as a set of quality standards for secondary schools or standards for nationally-qualified schools, most local governing bodies were concerned with only some key factors such as students' performance in tests high-stakes exams or teachers' awards in teaching contests. It is suggested that MoET should develop an accountability system for schools with high autonomy, which would

cover a wide variety of school performance-based standards, criteria, and indicators for quality improvement rather than school ranking or competition. Schools should be accountable to both governing bodies and students' parents, who directly contribute financial resources to the school. The scope of school accountability to parents should be enlarged to include not only students' performance but also other aspects of school activities. Importantly, the new accountability system should not place any more administrative burdens on the school and teachers. In addition, the current administrative system should be modernized to reduce non-teaching tasks for teachers and save time and resources for schools.

Fourth, when granting higher autonomy to schools, MoET should clarify the authority and responsibility of local governing bodies to avoid overlapping or inconsistency in state governance. This study revealed that school autonomy significantly increased tensions between schools and governing bodies when the latter maintained a top-down approach and conducted forceful interventions into school activities. Therefore, the authority and influence of local governing bodies over public schools should also be clarified, and local governing bodies should respect the school's freedom and decisions. When accompanied by more comprehensive school accountability, governing bodies could reduce monitoring and inspections to less interrupt school activities. Particularly, when schools implement new education practices, governing bodies should be expected to change their role from leading and checking to supporting and advising schools in professional matters.

Fifth, current regulations on the school councils should be revised toward increasing their voices and influence on critical school-level decisions. School councils should play the role of powerful bodies in terms of leading schools strategically, and monitoring and governing the work of school boards and school principals. This study

recognized huge barriers from the current school structure that highlights the authority of the Communist Party and school leaders. However, the dictating and abuse of power by the school principal could be avoided by stronger participation of school council members in the decision-making process and increased principal accountability to the school council. Besides, this study did not support granting full autonomy to teachers and parents in making school-level decisions but increasing their participation in these decisions. This strategy should be implemented in parallel with strengthening their capacity in managing and criticizing school practices.

Last, this study called for higher teacher autonomy over professional matters. The current education structure puts teachers in the lowest position in making professional decisions at the classroom and their teacher group. This study indicated that when having professional autonomy, teachers can explore their potential capacity and creativity to create meaningful changes to school education. Therefore when implementing school-based curriculum development and other education changes in the coming years, teachers in particular and professional groups should have decentralized autonomy to improve teaching and learning practices. A gradual decentralization could be an appropriate approach in the current context when most public school teachers are not ready to shoulder higher professional autonomy and responsibility. In addition, there should be systems and guidance to develop teachers' professionalism and support them in exercising autonomy. The responsibility and accountability of teachers, especially lead teachers, must be regulated to avoid misuse or abuse of authority.

Implications for Practice

Although schools vary in their specific conditions and how they respond to school autonomy, several findings from the study are applicable across all settings and, thus, suggest potential implications for professional practice. First, when being a public self-

financed school and enjoying a higher level of school autonomy over finance, schools should bear in mind that an enormous challenge is how to balance economic and educational goals. On the one hand, schools were under constant pressure to mobilize a vast amount of money to maintain the school budget and advance school facilities. On the other hand, schools must continuously improve education quality and increase school competitiveness to attract more students and ensure long-term school development. The school in this study applied a strategy that put a priority on education quality and sacrificed short-term economic benefits in the initial years to realize long-term goals. However, this study was unable to suggest a concrete strategy to deal with this dilemma because it depends on the school's specific features and choices.

In the context of self-financed schools, this study suggests that schools should consider parents as not only an essential source of the school budget but also as potential partners in school education. Instead of calling for a higher tuition fee and placing a greater financial burden on parents, schools could involve parents in school education activities or the decision-making process. Increasing school accountability to parents in terms of not only students' performance but also other aspects of school activities would be a practical suggestion towards maintaining a close link between the school and parents.

Since developing a school-based curriculum for the basic program would be an unfeasible scenario in the coming years due to current national frames, this study implies that schools could utilize current autonomy to invest in co-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities do not only develop students' competencies more comprehensively, and improve school education but also create distinctive features for schools, and attract prospective students. The evidence from this study suggests several courses of action for public schools such as calling for parental participation, developing a partnership with school partners, and granting student autonomy.

In the context of Vietnamese education, this study suggests that whether having autonomy or not, public schools should turn more attention to the needs, voices, and roles of students in every school activity. Investigating students' features and understanding their needs are necessary to increase school responsiveness to students. As students are a substantial resource, schools should grant them more autonomy in implementing school activities as well as involving them in school decisions that relate to their learning and well-being. Accordingly, teachers should turn from a directing and leading role to a supporting and advising role for students. Most importantly, schools and teachers should trust in students' capacity and respect their voices in both teaching and learning and school practice.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers play a decisive role in the success of school autonomy. School autonomy could make significant impacts on school improvements through designing an accurate and objective teacher appraisal system, remunerating teachers according to merit, developing teachers' professionalism, empowering teacher autonomy, encouraging their creativity, and empathizing with their failures. These practices would be useful indicators for public schools to improve teachers' professionalism and efficiency.

Developing a set of school values and distinctive features would be an effective strategy for schools because they will distinguish one school from others and attract students. These values would lay a firm foundation for school-based curriculum and school activities. Of these, the most fundamental school values should relate to responding to the needs of key stakeholders such as students, teachers, and parents. This study also hinted that the success of implementing school autonomy needed a gradual transformation strategy rather than drastic changes. Setting achievable objectives and

clear expected results, inspiring and facilitating small changes are practical suggestions for public schools in realizing granted autonomy.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this is an initial qualitative study on school autonomy in Vietnam, this research has opened up many possibilities for further investigation. First, as time restrictions allowed only for the study of one public self-financed school located in a big city, there is limited potential for generalizing the findings to the wider school setting. Thus, it is recommended that further research involves a larger sample of public schools with different levels of autonomy to more fully explore the various aspects of school autonomy and its impacts in varied settings. Moreover, more quantitative research is needed to validate the substantive theory generated from this study. Second, this qualitative study explored the perspectives of school leaders and teachers on the impacts of school autonomy, whereas the voice of other stakeholders such as students, parents, governing bodies was not included. Further investigations should probe the views of these stakeholders on school autonomy and how school autonomy influences their work. Third, as the new national general curriculum and textbook will be implemented from the school year 2019-2020, researchers should take this golden opportunity to investigate how public schools exercise their autonomy in curriculum development. Longitudinal studies on the impact of school autonomy over the years would deepen our understanding of school autonomy. Last, this study focuses on the impact of school autonomy on the four areas of educational activities, school structure, teachers, and school culture. The findings of this study hinted that school autonomy can significantly change the work of school leaders. Further studies need to be carried out to explore school leadership in the school autonomy context and compare it with that in public and private school settings.

Secondary school education in Vietnam has suffered from over-centralization and top down administration but some modernizing initiatives are underway with particular interest in increasing school autonomy. This study has shown that although there is much to be done and many difficulties to be overcome, a new generation of autonomous schools could release the innovative energy of teachers and students to play a more significant role in the continuing development of the education system.

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APENDIX 1. Application for Permission to Conduct Research

Date: 02.26.2016

Subject: An application for permission to conduct research

Dear Ms. A,

I am Cuc Dieu Nguyen, a Ph.D. student at the University of Giessen. I am conducting a research project named ‘the impact of school autonomy on a school: A grounded theory study in Vietnam.’ This study aims to explore the view of school leaders and teachers on the impacts of school autonomy on their school. Within the scope of this study, school autonomy is defined as the authority and responsibilities of schools in making decisions within a determined framework of goals, policies, standards, and accountabilities. This study explores school autonomy in four domains: educational, organization, human resource management, and financial resource management.

I am writing this letter to apply for permission to research your school in two months from 03.01.2016 to 04.29-2016. The school and research participation will gain no economic benefit from involving in this study. To ensure confidentiality principles and avoid potential harms, your school will be presented under a pseudo, and school demographic information will be blurred.

The study will employ two main methods of data collection, interview, and observation. For the interview, the study initially expects to interview at least ten teachers and school managers. However, as the data collection and data analysis will be conducted simultaneously, the number of interviewees would be increased until the data reaches saturation. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes and up to one hour. A second followed interview would be added if necessary. The interview will focus on the view of interviewees on the impacts of school autonomy. The participation of interviewees is voluntary based on their informed consent. The researcher commits to

provide full disclosure of the study to interviewees before interviews. They have the right to withdraw from the interview as well as from the study at any time. For the observation method, the researcher expects to participate in all school meetings such as regular school board meetings, regular teacher meetings, group teacher meetings, and training activities. In the initial phase of the study, the researcher expects to observe some classes to explore the teaching practice of the school. The information of people who were mentioned to in observations will be blurred to minimize potential risks of non-confidentiality. All interview and observation data will be used for study only. The data will be kept secure and will not be shared with a third party. During my field trip, I commit to school regulations, respect the work of teachers and students, and try not to intervene in school activities.

This study will be shared with my dissertation committee and other members of the university community. A dissertation that results from this work would be published in hard and electronic copy, which will be housed at the university library. The dissertation then would be published to a book or academic journal papers.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach me at e-mail address ... I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Cuc Dieu Nguyen.

APENDIX 2. Interview Protocol

In the initial stage of field trip, the researcher prepared a list of interview questions. However, these questions were just initiated general ideas and leaved many space for further discussions. The questions were modified or changed between interviewees according to specific topics mentioned in interviews.

1. Please tell me about your general experience when working in this school?
2. Could you tell me more about your teaching work? How do you feel when working in this school?
3. Did you involve in developing school-based curriculum? Please tell me more about this activities? What did you do? Which advantages and difficulties did you meet when developing curriculum?
4. How about your relationship with students? What do you usually do
5. How about your relationship with students' parents? What do you usually do to maintain cooperation with students' parents? How parents involve in school activities?
6. How about your relationship with colleagues? Which activities do you and colleagues often involve in together?
7. Could you tell me about teachers' professional development activities in your school? Do you usually involve in these activities? How do you think about these activities?
8. How school-level decision are made in your school? Do you have chances to involve in those decisions? Please give an example if any.
9. Could you briefly describe your school? Which features would be the most typical for your school?

10. How long have you worked in this school? Do you realize some recent changes in your school?
11. Have you ever worked in other public or private schools? Do you recognize any difference between two school environments? Why there are these differences?
12. Does your school maintain relationship with other schools? Do you maintain cooperation with other schools or institutes?
13. In general, which are your satisfaction and dissatisfaction to the school? Why?
14. Do you have any comments or suggestions to improve your school? Do you think the school should receive more autonomy?

Thanks for your participation!

APPENDIX 3. Reflexive Journal

This journal records the main activities that occurred during the field trip in 2016 with a list of participants and observations. This journal does not provide a description of interviewees to secure their personal information.

Date and time	Activity log	Notes
02.29.2016 17:00-17:30	First meeting with the school principal to introduce the study and ask for permission	The principal recommended to Mr. B – vice principal to support the research activities in the school.
03.01.2016 08:00-08.30	Meeting with vice-principal to introduce the study, the scope of work.	The vice-principal recommended some first contacts to teachers
03.02.2016 11:00-12.00	Observation #1. Meeting with Miazaki high school (from Japan)	The meeting was begun 30 minutes earlier than scheduled.
03.03.2016 15:30-17:00	Observation #2 Sharing good-practice in teaching and learning	Two presenters were teachers who were rewarded for innovations in teaching and learning
03.03.2016 17:30-19:45	Observation #3 Meeting with headteachers and all teachers teaching in 12 th Grade	The meeting lasted longer than expected because there were many problems to deal with.
03.10.2016 15:30-17:15	Observation #4 Monthly meeting with homeroom teachers - March	
03.15.2016 08:00-09:45	Observation #5 Meeting with Ha Tinh University	The University visited to learn experience in school education
03.18.2016 10:00-12:00	Observation #6 Training course of testing and assessment for Mathematics teachers	The presenter was a professor from a university
03.20.2016 08:00-10:15	Observation #7 Parent club meeting for parents of 10 th Grade students	This event was a regular parent club meeting organized by the school

03.23.2016 14:00-16:00	Observing a History class, a Civil Education class	These observations aimed to explore teaching and learning practices and were not used in data analysis.
03.24.2016 16:00-18:30	Observation #8 Demo presentations of students taking part in a scientific conference in Singapore	
03.26.2016 11:00-12:00	Observation #9 A ceremony of Youth Union for teachers	
03.26.2016 16:00-17:00	Observing one regular student meeting.	This observation aimed to explore teaching and learning practices and was not used in data analysis.
03.28.2016 14:00-14:45	Interview #1	
03.29.2016 14:00-15:30	Observing a Literature class and Interview #2	This observation aimed to explore teaching and learning practices and was not used in data analysis.
04.01.2016 08:00-08:45	Observation #10 Meeting with Faculty of Social Works about internship of international students	
04.07.2016 14:00-17:00	Observation #11 Final round of Young Inventor Contest A short discussion with school principal during the contest	As this discussion was not previously planned, there was no recording and full transcripts but take notes only
04.09.2016 09:00-11:15	Observation #12 Training course of renovating testing and assessment for Physics teachers	
04.10.2016 08:30-09:30	Observation #13 Meeting of Parent's Representative Board of	

	12 th Grade	
04.11.2016 10:00-10:45	Interview #3	The interview was not finished because the interviewee had a lesson. The interviewee agreed to arrange another interview.
04.12.2016 10:30-11:30	Observation #14 Meeting with student teachers from the Faculty of Educational Psychology	
04.12.2016 11:30-12:00	Interview #4	
04.12.2016 17:15-18:15	Interview #5	The interviewee was recommended by Interviewee #3. The interviewee agreed to arrange another interview if needed
04.12.2016 19:00-21:00	Interview #6	As the interviewee could not arrange an interview in work hours, she agreed to interview in a coffee shop in the evening.
04.13.2016 13:00-13:40	Interview #3 (continued)	
04.14.2016 09:45-10:15	Interview #7	The interviewee was recommended by Interviewee #2
04.14.2016 10:20-10:30	Interview #8	As the interviewee felt uncomfortable with answering questions, she withdrew from the interview.
04.14.2016 10:40-11:20	Interview #9	The interviewee was recommended by Interviewee #3
04.14.2016	Interview #10	

15:00-15:30		
04.14.2016 17:00-18:10	Observation #15 Meeting of Organization Board of Graduation Party	
04.15.2016 08:30-09:15	Interview #11	The interviewee was recommended by Interviewee #3
04.15.2016 10:00-10:40	Interview #12	
04.15.2016 11:00-11:50	Interview #13	The interviewee was recommended by Interviewee #6
04.19.2016 10:30-11:30	Observation #16 Meeting with student teachers from the Faculty of Social Works	
04.19.2016 11:30-12:05	Interview #14	
04.19.2016 15:00-15:50	Interview #15	
04.20.2016 14:00-14:50	Interview #16	
04.20.2016 16:15-17:45	Observation #17 Meeting of Organization Board of Workshop: School Curriculum Development	After the meeting, the principal asked me to read and comment on a school report. Then we had a long discussion on school missions and strategic development.
04.21.2016 11:00-11:50	Interview #17	
04-21.2016 16:00-17:00	Observation #18 Training course of testing and assessment for Physics teachers	This was a followed up training course of a previous course on 09.04. After that, there was

		another training course for Chemistry teachers. I did not participate in the whole course because I must observe another teacher's meeting.
04-21.2016 17:00-18:45	Observation #19 Monthly meeting with homeroom teachers - April	
04.26.2016 10:00-10:50	Interview #18	
04.27.2016 16:00-17:00	Observation #20 Meeting of Organization Board of Welcoming Anderson High School	
04.28.2016 16:30-17:15	Observation #21 Meeting to organize experimental learning for students of 6th and 7th Grades	
04.28.2016 17:30-18:15	Observation #22 Meeting with parents who are host family of A. High School students	The delegation of A. High School (Singapore) will visit the school next week, and students will stay in these host families.
05.04.2016 09:00-09:40	Interview #19	
05.04.2016 10:00-10:45	Interview #20	
05.04.2016 14:00-14:25	Interview #21	
05.04.2016 16:00-16:50	Interview #22	
05.10.2016 17:00-17:45	Observation #23 Meeting Organization Board of School Year-End Ceremony	

05.11.2016 15:00-15:40	Interview #23	
05.12.2016 15:30-17:00	Observation #24 Monthly meeting with homeroom teachers - May	
05.13.2016 15:00-16:00	Observation #25 Teacher meetings to prepare for inter-subject learning activities	
05.13.2016 16:30-17:10	Interview #24	
05.13.2016 17:30-18:10	Interview #25	
05.15.2016 09:00-10:00	Interview #26	
05.15.2016 14:00-17:00	Observation #26 School conference on school-based curriculum development	
01.13.2018 11:00-12:00	Interview #27	The researcher made another interview to collect data in some areas.

APPENDIX 4. Code System

1 SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM	0
1.1 Should schools have autonomy in the curriculum?	0
1.1.1 reluctant	3
1.1.2 yes they should	8
1.2 Responding to students' needs	0
1.2.1 The curriculum is revised to fit with students of this school	6
1.2.2 The goals of competence development	11
1.2.3 The goals of co-curricular activities	5
1.2.4 The goals of preparing for tests	10
1.3 The advanced program	2
1.4 School strategies	0
1.4.1 Data-driven instruction	3
1.4.2 Being different from other schools	7
1.4.2.1 Physical and Art education	3
1.4.2.2 Extra courses	6
1.4.2.3 Co-curricular activities	2
1.4.2.3.1 School's co-curricular	10
1.4.2.3.1.1 Co-curricular activities of subjects	5
1.4.2.3.1.2 Students' research	4
1.4.2.3.1.3 Student's club	15
1.4.2.3.2 Limitations of co-curricular activities	2
1.4.3 A gradual change strategy	0
1.4.3.1 Setting specific objectives	5
1.4.3.2 Facilitating gradual changes	11
1.4.3.3 Top-down vs. bottom-up changes	1
1.4.3.4 Money is not the priority	8
1.5 Recognized changes	0
1.5.1 Changes within national and local frames	22
1.5.2 Making revises based on school practice	3
1.5.3 Different scope of changes	0
1.5.3.1 Unremarkable	5
1.5.3.2 Remarkable	5
1.5.4 Increasing instructional time	5

1.6 Recognized improvements to teaching and learning practice	0
1.6.1 School curriculum is more diverse than the national one	3
1.6.2 Overcome the limitations of MoET's curriculum	5
1.6.2.1 Too theoretical	1
1.6.2.2. Inappropriate to schools with different features	5
1.6.2.3. Inflexible	5
1.6.3 Increasing flexibility in teaching and learning	15
1.6.4 Attract more partner to involve in school education	15
1.6.5 Students are developed more skills and competences	27
1.6.6 Changes to learning objectives	6
1.6.7 Changes to classroom practices	11
1.6.8 Changes to assessment	3
1.6.9 Integrated and experiential learning	12
1.6.10 Project-based learning	6
1.7 Continuous improvement when developing school curriculum	15
1.8 Difficulties when implementing school curriculum	4
1.8.1 School facility	6
1.8.2 Teachers' inexperience	18
1.8.3 Teachers must work harder	4
1.8.3.1 Not remarkable challenges	2
1.8.3.2 Teachers must develop new learning contents	3
1.8.3.3 Teachers must make new lesson plans	7
1.8.4 Teachers are not trained or instructed	2
1.8.5 A gap from theory to practice	10
1.8.6 Teaching to the test	18
1.8.6.1 The school has no autonomy in assessment	4
1.8.6.2 Pressure to teachers	3
1.8.6.3 Pressure to students	5
1.8.6.4 A gap from test score to students' capacity	5
1.8.6.5 Contrast between CBA and high-stakes exams	3
1.8.6.6 High-stakes exams change constantly	8
1.8.6.7 Pressure from parents	3
1.8.6.8 Innovations are applied in lower grades only	2
1.8.7 Barriers from administrative bodies	0
1.8.7.1 They do not understand the school-based curriculum	2

1.8.7.2 MoET and DoET supports but DoET neither	2
1.8.7.3 They do not support school innovations	3
1.8.7.4 Focusing too much on administrative papers	16
1.8.7.5 Achievement regime	1
1.8.7.6 Creating negative influences on teachers	3
1.8.7.7 Governing bodies are barriers	5
2 PERFORMANCE-BASED PAY	1
2.1 Description of teacher appraisal	3
2.1.1 Students' feedback	0
2.1.1.1 the result is accurate	2
2.1.1.2 the result is not entirely accurate	8
2.1.1.3 teachers' reactions	3
2.1.1.4 a source of reference to improve teachers	9
2.1.2 Student performance	0
2.1.2.1 Impact on teachers	4
2.1.3 Peer review	5
2.1.4 School principal made accurate evaluation	4
2.1.5 Evaluation of Admin Board	0
2.1.6 Teacher appraisal result is	0
2.1.6.1 accurate	7
2.1.6.2 not really accurate	7
2.2 Teacher pay	0
2.2.1 School autonomy contributes to increasing salary	12
2.2.2 Tenure based pay in other public schools	4
2.2.3 A flexible tool	0
2.2.3.1 Appraisal result has a link to remuneration	15
2.2.3.1.1 Good achievements lead to a salary increase	13
2.2.3.1.2 Weak performances lead to a lower salary	3
2.2.3.1.3 Unqualified teachers must be sacked	11
2.2.3.2 Offer a good salary and bonus to ensure education quality	3
2.2.4 Teachers are not satisfied with their salary	2
2.3 Recognition	0
2.3.1 Recognition	15
2.3.2 Encouragement	8
2.3.3 Promoting the mental value	0

2.4 High turnover	4
2.5 Teacher's feelings	0
2.5.1 Happy and satisfied	17
2.5.1.1 Factors contributing to satisfaction	0
2.5.1.1.1 Recognition and encouragement	2
2.5.1.1.2 Salary	10
2.5.1.1.3 Collegiality	6
2.5.1.1.4 Environment	13
2.5.1.1.5 Students	8
2.5.2 Under pressure	17
2.5.3 Unstable	8
3 TEACHERS	0
3.1 Teachers' autonomy	4
3.1.1 Teacher autonomy (in general)	5
3.1.2 Increasing autonomy in selecting learning content	13
3.1.3 Increasing autonomy in selecting instructional methods	8
3.1.4 Increasing autonomy in arranging instruction schedule	5
3.1.5 Teacher autonomy in evaluation	4
3.1.6 As long as the final result is good	12
3.1.7 Teacher autonomy could not be expanded	1
3.1.8 Support for teacher autonomy	5
3.2 Teacher groups	0
3.2.1 Facilitating young teachers	3
3.2.1.1 Responding to faults	0
3.2.1.1.1 Negative	3
3.2.1.1.2 Positive	12
3.2.1.2 Facilitating for innovations + Supporting new ideas	35
3.2.1.3 Trust in teachers and give them chances	17
3.2.2 Lead teachers	0
3.2.2.1 The scope of lead teacher's autonomy	0
3.2.2.1.1 Significant autonomy	6
3.2.2.1.2 Unremarkable autonomy	4
3.2.2.2 Lead teacher autonomy	5
3.2.2.2.1 the consequence of lead teacher autonomy	2
3.2.3 Diversity encouragement	0

3.2.3.1 Culture of teacher groups	4
3.2.3.2 Diversity encouragement	0
3.2.3.2.1 Many excellent teachers	11
3.2.3.2.2 Every teacher is one color	17
3.2.3.2.3 Teachers can learn many things thanks to working in a diverse group	7
3.2.3.2.4 A diverse group constraints communication between members	2
3.2.3.2.5 Tenure, visiting, contractual teachers	0
3.2.3.2.5.1 Struggles to tenure teachers	5
3.2.3.2.5.2 Visiting teachers	2
3.2.3.2.5.2.1 Advantages of visiting teacher	13
3.2.3.2.5.2.2 Limitations of visiting teacher	10
3.2.3.2.6 Good collegiality	16
3.2.3.2.6.1 Reflecting and commenting	24
3.2.3.2.6.2 Supporting	23
3.2.3.2.6.3 Sharing	23
3.2.3.2.6.4 Being friendly	9
3.2.3.2.6.5 Bad points of collegiality	5
3.2.4 Teacher group autonomy in professional development	1
3.2.5 Teacher group autonomy in academic issues	6
3.3 Teacher participation in school-level decisions	0
3.3.1 School structure	2
3.3.2 Teachers' voice in teaching and learning activities	5
3.4 Challenges to teachers	0
3.4.1 Many sources of pressures	4
3.4.2 Be always busy	15
3.4.3 Dealing complicated situation with parents	6
3.4.4 School requirements for teachers	2
3.4.4.1 High requirements in teacher recruitment	2
3.4.4.2 Administrative works	13
3.4.4.3 Other requirements	2
3.4.4.4 Everybody must try the best	6
3.4.4.5 Be self-responsible	3
3.4.4.6 Always have to generate new ideas	13
3.5 Teacher's working motivations	2

3.5.1 Higher motivations than other schools	7
3.5.2 Work for self-respect	14
3.5.3 Work for self-development	2
3.5.4 Work for livelihood	4
3.5.4.1 No student - no money	3
4 SCHOOL VALUES	0
4.1 The school's education philosophy	13
4.2 A desire to increase professionalism	4
4.3 Learning organization	0
4.3.1 The school encourages learning and sharing	2
4.3.1.1 Learning is not a school value	1
4.3.2 The school often experiments new ideas	9
4.3.3 The school emphasizes on professional development activities	9
4.3.4 Supporting for learning activities of every teacher	6
4.3.5 Lesson study	0
4.3.5.1 Limitations	1
4.3.5.2 Improvements	6
4.3.6 International cooperation for learning and development	0
4.3.6.1 Selecting international partners for learning	5
4.3.6.2 Inspiring school values to international partners	7
4.3.6.3 Learning from international practice	13
4.3.6.4 An overview of international cooperation	9
4.3.7 Fixing after fails	8
4.3.8 Wisdom comes with age	4
4.3.8.1 Senior teachers resist from changes	3
4.3.9 Be willing to ask and learn from others	0
4.3.9.1 Learn from doing research	3
4.3.9.2 Good mentor everywhere	6
4.3.9.3 Learn from students	2
4.3.9.4 Mutual learning	23
4.3.10 Teacher in-service training	6
4.3.10.1 Limitations of in service training	4
4.3.10.2 School autonomy supports in-service training	0
4.3.10.3 There are many in-service training activities	9
4.3.10.4 School-based training	13

	4.3.11 Self-study	14
system	4.3.11.1 Teachers must study due to the requirement of the appraisal	5
	4.3.11.2 Learning is a passion	9
	4.3.11.3 Teachers actively learn from others	17
	4.3.11.4 Teachers are fond of learning and creating new ideas	18
	4.3.11.5 The purpose of private tutoring	6
	4.3.12 Learning via school collaboration	0
	4.3.12.1 Learn and exchange with the Faculty	33
	4.3.12.2 Model teaching for HUNE students	18
	4.3.12.3 The relationship btw NTT and HNUE	6
	4.3.12.4 Learn and exchange with other schools	12
	4.3.12.4.1 Sharing for learning	2
	4.3.13 Doing research	6
	4.3.13.1 Work pressure constraints teachers from doing research	1
	4.4 Strong link btw school and family	0
	4.4.1 Parents' characteristics	0
	4.4.2 The influence of parents on school activities	0
	4.4.2.1 Parents set high requirements for the school	10
	4.4.2.2 Cooperation with parents in educating students	17
	4.4.2.3 Parent's involvement in school activities	7
	4.4.2.4 Accountability to parents	1
	4.4.2.5 Contributing money	1
	4.4.2.6 Making proposals to educational activities	7
	4.4.3 Feedback from parents	13
	4.5 Dedication to students	0
	4.5.1 Students' characteristics	24
	4.5.1.1 Students set high requirements for teachers	12
	4.5.2 Respecting to student autonomy	18
	4.5.2.1 Student - teacher relation	9
	4.5.2.2 Student involvement in school activities	5
	4.5.3 Doing everything for students' success	24
	4.5.3.1 Strict regulations	1
	4.5.3.2 Difficult in managing students	1
	4.5.3.3 Teachers are dedicated to students	9

	4.5.3.4 Teachers understand every student very well	7
situations	4.5.3.5 Teachers are willing to work free or in disadvantaged	1
	4.5.3.6 Supporting students is a shared responsibility	8
	4.5.3.7 Solutions for low performing students	9
	4.5.3.8 Cooperation between subject teachers and homeroom teacher	13
	4.5.3.9 Students' success is the ultimate goal	30
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