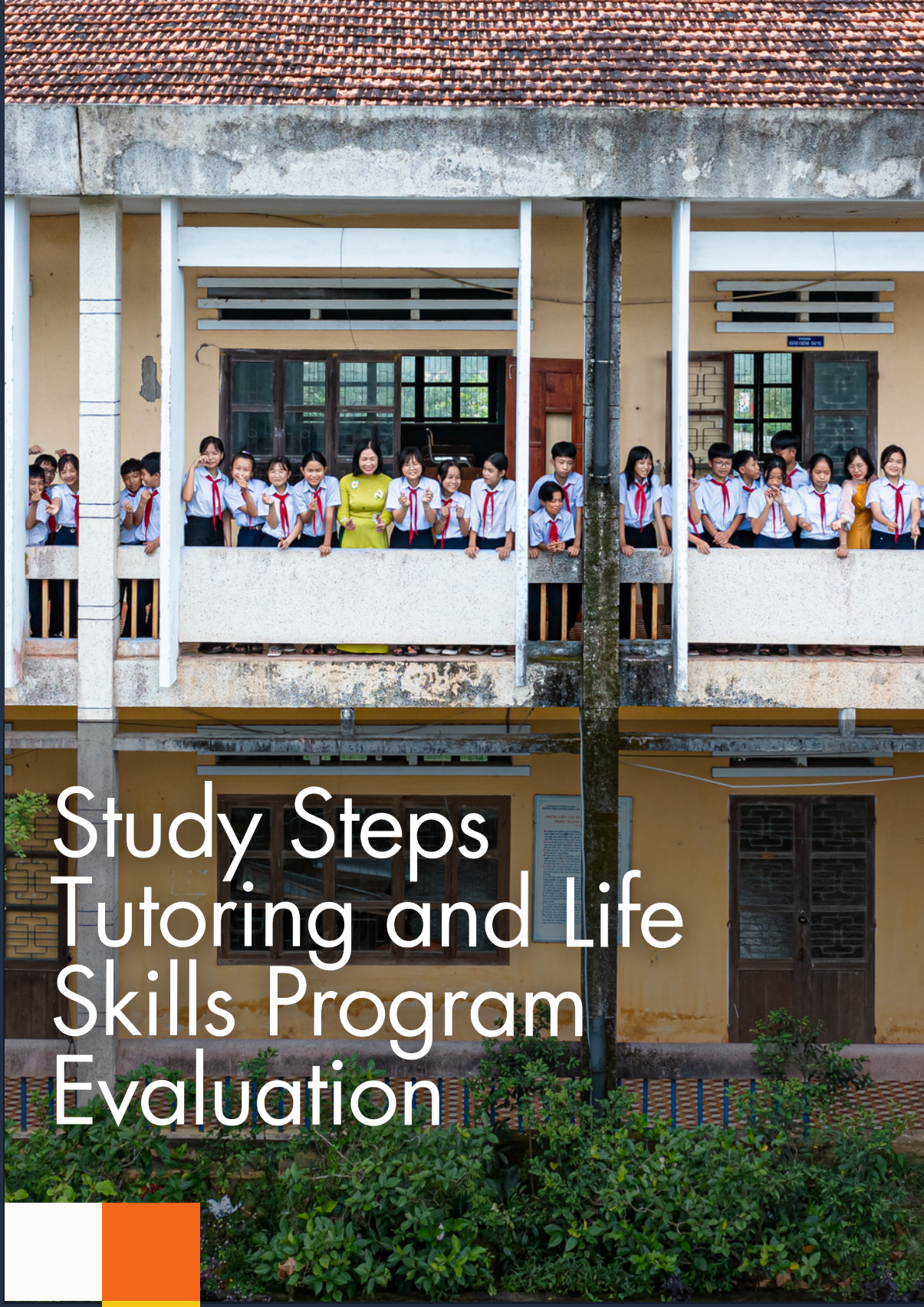

Study Steps Tutoring and Life Skills Program Evaluation

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Children of Vietnam

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Children of Vietnam
Building Bright Futures

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1 SCOPE

This report is intended to give an appraisal of the approach, implementation and effectiveness of the Children of Vietnam (COV) Study Steps program. It seeks to critically evaluate the program, and assess students' individual experiences of study and social mobility within the broader context of social and economic change in Vietnam today. In so doing, it draws on recent research about schooling, social class, economic inequality, differential access to education and life-chances within the opportunity structure of post-reform Vietnam.

The first half of the report introduces the program and presents relevant information about the socio-economic, institutional and policy context of education and social differentiation in Vietnam and Quảng Nam/Đà Nẵng Provinces in particular. The second half assesses the social impact of the program, presents detailed findings from our interviews and datasets, and offers some feedback.

2

METHODOLOGY

For this report, Australian National University anthropologist, Dr. Ashley Carruthers and Children of Vietnam (COV) Program Coordinator, Nguyễn Phan Quỳnh Phương conducted semi- structured interviews cum focus groups with:

- 10 current Study Steps students in 7th grade.
- One principal and two vice principals from lower secondary schools (Trường Học Cơ Sở) that host cohorts of 25 Study Steps students each.
- Three teachers from partner schools who act as in-school tutors for Study Steps students.
- The head of the Hòa Vang Office of Education.

We also surveyed 20 sets of parents, and evaluated data on four cohorts of students. This grouping includes COV recipients from 99 households in one rural commune, two periurban, and one urban ward.

In addition, Dr. Carruthers took part in extensive informal discussions with COV staff, and conducted participant observation in meetings and other daily activities with Children of Vietnam over a period of 10 days in March 2023. We also reviewed materials on the organisation's website and social media to better understand its philosophy, range of programs and social impact. Finally, we drew upon the extensive background knowledge of Ms. Nguyễn, who has over 16 years experience working with Children of Vietnam's programs, including education for children with limited resources and those with disabilities, and was herself a recipient of a COV university scholarship.

3

STUDY STEPS

The Study Steps program began in 2012 as the initiative of Mr. Dan Quinn, a COV donor. Securing support from the Gate City Rotary Club in Greensboro, NC, the first cohort of students were 25 girls from Hòa Quý Ward, Ngũ Hành Sơn District, Đà Nẵng City. To date there have been 12 cohorts, with a total of 299 students having being supported in the program. Currently, there are five active cohorts, two from Hòa Vang and one from Cẩm Lệ, both peri urban districts of Đà Nẵng. To our knowledge, these students are all ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), reflecting the demographics of the partner schools' catchment areas.

Selection criteria (with preference given to girls) are based on the following attributes and priorities:

- Families officially defined as "poor" and "near-poor" according to the nationally defined multidimensional poverty standards.
- Households with a monthly combined income below 2.5 million VND.
- Single-parent households.
- Families with a member suffering from a severe illness or disability.
- Families with three or more school aged children.
- Families residing in vulnerable geographical areas such as low-lying, remote, isolated, and disaster-prone zones.
- Families with multiple generations living together, and/or not owning their own homes.
- Families facing a combination of the above mentioned challenges.
- Students who demonstrate effort in self-improvement, a willingness to excel in their studies, and encouragement from parents, including reminders, and concern for their children's education.

The program provides the following forms of support:

ESSENTIALS

COV staff assess the material needs of students on a case by case basis, and, as needed, provide essentials such as:

- Books and stationery
- Bicycles
- Desks, chairs and lamps
- Uniforms

ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP

- Students receive 1 million VND at the start of 6th and 7th grade.
- These funds are meant to meet study-related costs, such as school fees, and to relieve financial pressure on the family.

IN-SCHOOL TUTORIALS

- Study Steps students receive 36 tutoring sessions per month for the nine months of the school year.
- Students receive 12 lessons each in Mathematics, Literature and English per month.
- Tutorials last 45 minutes each, and are held at the end of the school day after regular classes.
- Tutorials are taught by teachers employed at the school who are remunerated by COV.
- The focus of these classes is to prepare students for examinations.

LIFE SKILLS CLASSES

- **Study Steps students receive one life skills class per semester on topics such as:**
  - Online safety
  - Self worth and positive thinking
  - The right to one's own body
  - Preventing violence and bullying at school
  - Sex education
  - Communication and proper behavior in public
  - Effective problem-solving
  - Conflict resolution
- These classes are taught by professionals, such as psychologists and lecturers from the Đà Nẵng University of Education, and are part of a program overseen by the Ministry of Education and Training.
- Students are taught in groups of 25-28, allowing time for each one to interact with the teacher and to participate in discussions and activities.

EXCURSIONS

At the end of each school year, Study Steps students are rewarded for their hard work with an outing to a location, such as:

- A museum
- The cinema
- A global fast food restaurant
- An amusement park

4

SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND EDUCATION IN VIETNAM TODAY

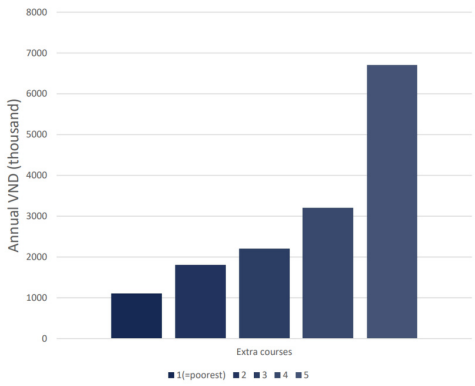
In recent decades, Vietnamese people have enjoyed unprecedented opportunities in education and employment; at the same time, however, they have experienced unprecedented degrees of social inequality (Chu 2018, p.59).

Observers of social change in Vietnam are presently sounding warning bells about rising inequality. According to the World Bank's **2022 Vietnam Poverty and Equity Assessment**, the country's rapid economic growth since the advent of the Đổi Mới reforms in the 1980s has been "broadly inclusive" and livelihoods have "improved dramatically", but chronic poverty reduction challenges remain. As Vietnam moves towards Upper-Middle Income Country status, the poorest households are "increasingly concentrated in low-income agricultural activities" and "risk falling further behind and being less connected to the more vibrant sectors of the economy" (World Bank 2022, pp. 1-4). The income gap between the poorest and richest quintile doubled between 1990 and 2006, and Vietnam's 2021 Household Living Standards Survey showed that the top quintile now earns eight times what the bottom quintile earns. Chu contends that "income inequality in Vietnam has been escalating at one of the fastest recorded rates in the world" (Chu 2018, p.61).

Most significant for our purposes is how this emerging inequality affects access to education and, by extension, opportunities for students' social mobility. Importantly, since the 2000s, the Vietnamese government has been transferring financial responsibility for the rapidly expanding education sector onto the shoulders of families and individuals, with a parallel trend in health and social insurance. Vietnam's spending on social assistance (1.2% of GDP) and overall spending on education (4.2%) are both low for countries within its region and for those in its income group (World Bank 2022, p. 14, Human Capital Project 2020). For children in the poorest 20% of households, the Human Capital Index (HCI) is 17 points below the national average, while it is 16 points above for children in the richest quintile. "Unsurprisingly", notes a World Bank report, "children in the top 20% have higher nutrition, health, and education outcomes" (World Bank 2022, p.114).

Beginning with primary school, families with means spend substantially more on private tutoring than do poor families. In lower grades, households in the top quintile spend more than five times as much on private education than do those in the bottom quintile, and ten times as much at upper secondary level. 80% of the children of the top quintile remain in education until their early twenties, while virtually none in the bottom quintile do. The figure is only 20% for the second and third wealth quintiles. In addition, those in poor communities tend to have access only to lesser quality schools, while the better resourced ones are concentrated in metropolitan centres. These facts further disadvantage poor children in competing with more affluent ones to enter upper secondary and tertiary study. Ethnicity is another significant measure of inequality in private education spending, where the ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh spend more than seven times as much on education as ethnic minorities (World Bank 2022, pp. 11, 202).

Figure O.13. Houshold expenditures on extra education courses at compulsory grade levels in public school, by household quintile



Note: Categories by household quintiles. Average expenditures among households with children in public primary or lower-secondary education.
Soure: World Bank staft calculations using VHLSS 2020.

Source: World Bank 2022, p. 12.

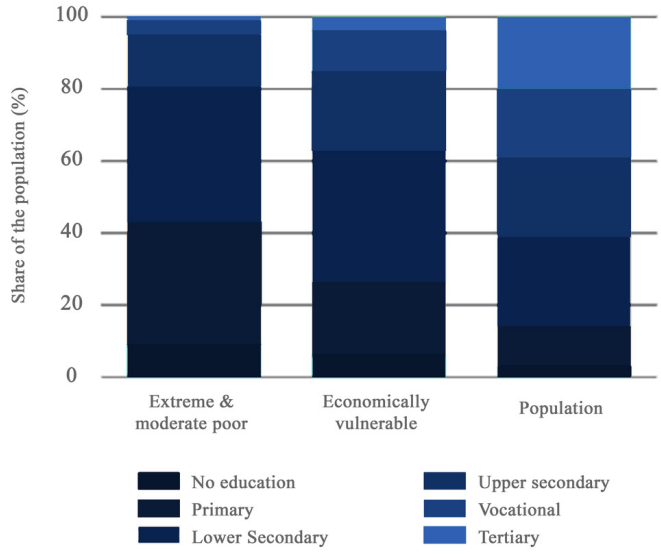
	PRIMARY	LOWER SECONDARY	UPPER SECONDARY
Richest	100%	98%	92%
Urban	98%	91%	75%
Total	98%	87%	59%
Rural	98%	85%	47%
Poorest	95%	67%	31%

School completion rates

A UNICEF study observes that the completion rates gap between children from the richest and poorest wealth quintiles "widens starkly" as they continue through the education system (Kataoka et al. 2020). As the table above shows, 92% of children from the top wealth quintile complete upper secondary education while only 31% of children from the poorest quintile manage to stay in school this long. Within the same school, students from the richest families outperform those in the poorest in a way that is statistically significant for all subjects, and pronounced for mathematics and English (ADB 2020, p. 83). Rolleston and Lyer find evidence for "continuing influences of home advantage across the educational life course, leading to persistent inequities" (2019, p. 231). "Strong inequities" in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills between the richest and poorest quintiles are also observed, which indicates that a significant digital divide exists between rural and urban areas, and between ethnic Vietnamese and the more marginal ethnic minority communities (Kataoka et al. 2020). On a more positive note, gender is no longer a significant axis of inequality in participation and performance in school in Vietnam. We'll discuss this below in more detail.

Oxfam states that education is the most important factor in social mobility in the three low-income Vietnamese provinces they studied. Their analysis of the 2014 Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) was to the effect that return on investment in education was increasing over time, with almost 80% of the children of unskilled and traditional manual workers graduating from college or higher having found skilled jobs. The figure for those with upper secondary diplomas was over 40% (Oxfam 2018, p.8). Tran (2023), who studied returns on secondary education in rural Vietnam, found similarly that levels of qualifications are closely correlated with one's wage income, with greater gains for men over women and Kinh over ethnic minorities.

A World Bank report finds that "both private and social returns on higher education are high in Vietnam", having increased from 13% in 1992–93 to 18–21% in 2014-22. By comparison the global rate is 9% return, generally being higher in developing countries as opposed to developed nations (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018). Vietnam's return on investment in education is also higher than for most countries in the region (Katoaka et al. 2020).



Educational attainments of the poor and economically vulnerable (World Bank 2022, p.9)

5

A SUCCESS STORY: THE VIETNAMESE SCHOOL SYSTEM

A World Bank report on Vietnamese secondary education awards the nation top marks, noting that "(e)ducation policy makers around the world marvel at Vietnam's education success" (Kataoka et al., 2020, p. 8). Proof of government efforts to improve the national school system is found in the fact that Vietnamese students on average now outperform those in OECD nations in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Investment in primary and basic literacy education, as well as prioritizing spending on equity, has led to "high and relatively equitable learning outcomes" (ibid., p. 8). In their study of post-compulsory schooling in Vietnam, Rolleston and Lyer (2019) note that there are many encouraging signs that the system is meritocratic rather than wealth-based. Given that the rural/urban divide is the most significant inequality in Vietnam today, investment has focused on "geographically disadvantaged" areas. More education funding is now allocated per capita to low-income rural provinces and districts than to wealthier regions, and teachers taking jobs in remote (i.e. upland) areas receive higher salaries than teachers in cities by means of various allowances.

Students from ethnic minorities, living in economically disadvantaged regions, get automatic entry into upper secondary school and priority entry into tertiary study. This does not translate into high completion rates for all minority groups, however. Among the H'mong, for instance, only around 30% of students complete upper secondary school. By contrast, there is good reason to believe that in Quảng Nam and Đà Nẵng, the situation is significantly better. A vice principal in one of the districts of Quảng Nam, with a 95% Cơ Tu student body, told us there is practically 100% enrollment in primary and lower secondary schools in his region, and he believes upper secondary completion is likely the same as the national average. If a student should drop out of primary or lower secondary school, he told us, the family will receive visits from the local authorities, school administration and even members of the Border Patrol. Hamlets with non-enrolled children are at risk of losing their official "cultured" status, and hence local authorities are not shy about putting pressure on parents. For better or worse, this means that completion rates are likely much higher for Cơ Tư and other ethnic minority students in Quảng Nam and Đà Nẵng than for ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) students from impoverished families. In addition, Cơ Tu students have access to fully supported residential schools in their home districts and, for high achievers, an ethnic minority boarding school in Hội An. Children of Vietnam supports 27 Cơ Tu university students from Tây Giang through its Bright Scholars program, demonstrating that this system is succeeding in giving ethnic minority students access to tertiary education.

While challenges of gender equity remain, the nation stands at 98.5% parity for Educational Attainment (World Economic Forum 2023). UNICEF notes that gender parity is observed in both foundational reading skills and digital skills, and that completion rates for girls are higher than boys for primary, secondary and upper secondary education (UNICEF 2023). It's also noteworthy that scholars now identify a "reverse gender gap" in Vietnamese schools, whereby lower enrolment rates for girls at the primary level switch to higher rates in secondary school, a result of girls' superior academic performance (Kataoka et al. 2020, p. 37).

In addition to matters of policy and funding and administration, explanations for the success of Vietnam's education system typically cite cultural factors including: the almost reverential value placed on education; parents' high expectations; high levels of household spending; and the disciplined nature of learning environments. Another highly significant factor is teacher quality. Vietnam's teachers are not only dedicated, but also benefit from good management, ongoing training, and competency-based reward systems. We would add that it is a major advantage in Vietnam that these values are shared across socio-economic divides, with farming and working class parents having the same dedication to their children's education as middle class urbanites. For these reasons and others, Vietnamese schools have bucked the trend towards decline that we see in the great majority of developing nations since the 1960s (Centre for Global Development 2023,The Economist 2023). Schools in Vietnam, by contrast, have gotten significantly better.

Things are of course not perfect, and many challenges remain. While government policy around core issues such as competency-based teaching, curriculum reform and textbook renewal is in general good, implementation and funding lag behind. The transition from the established model of education to a learner-centred model is still very much under way. Teaching is still widely characterised by rote learning, one-way knowledge transfer and "teaching to exams". While life skills classes, experiential and problem-based learning are becoming more common in Vietnamese schools, those based in poorer communities struggle to deliver such teaching, and certainly can't offer the number and variety of classes specified in policy (Lao Động 2023). Teachers report a lack of funding to upgrade classrooms and provide requisite learning materials. They also lack enough space and staff to teach the curriculum, and to guarantee classes of less than 35, the maximum number to which one can effectively deliver learner-centered lessons (Bình Định 2023).

The principals and teachers we interviewed for this report affirmed for us that their schools lack resources compared to those in more privileged areas, such as central Đà Nẵng. The Head of the Hòa Vang Education Office told us frankly that schools in his district "lack modern equipment", especially computers and screens. Tutors confirmed this, citing a lack of classrooms equipped with full audiovisual setups. Tutor B mentioned that teachers at her school have to bring in their own laptops to use as classroom screens. Tutor A noted that without COV, there would be a total lack of resources and expertise to teach life skills. She told us that at her school there are only enough teaching staff to cover the essential curriculum. The Head of the Hòa Vang Education Office also told us that schools in the more remote corners of the district have difficulty retaining newly graduated teachers after a year or two, and thus lack experienced educators. While there is a salary loading for teaching staff in remote areas, he told us, it only amounts to 5%, which is not a sufficient incentive.

6 POVERTY IN QUẢNG NAM PROVINCE AND ĐÀ NẴNG CITY

Locality	Population (millions)	Rural population rate (%)	Av. per capita monthly income (millions VND)	Multidimensional poverty rate (%)
National	99.46	65.4	4.674	4.2
Quảng Nam	1.52	75	3.825	7.5
Đà Nẵng	1.22	12.5	5.807	0.9

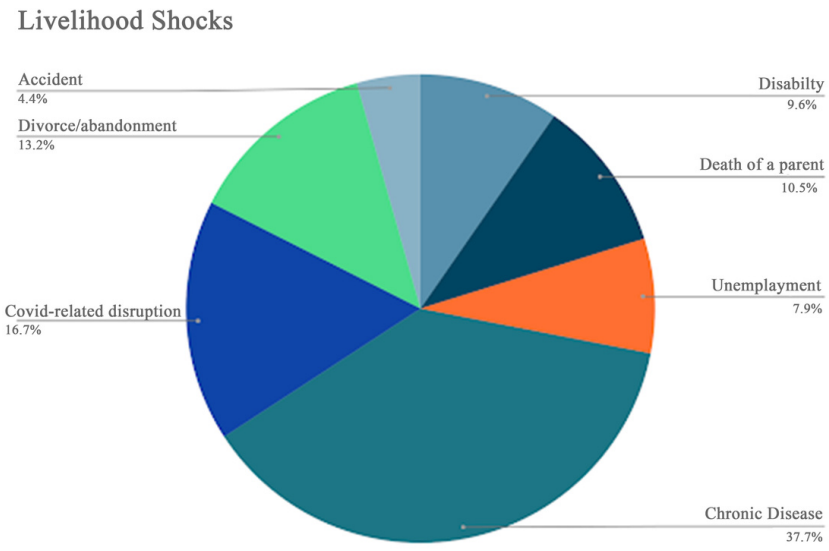
- Quảng Nam is 13% more rural than the national average, with a 20% lower average income, and 44% higher multi-dimensional poverty rate.
- The poverty rate in the mountains of Quảng Nam is as high as 18% according to local media, but in fact could be as high as 35-40% based on what we know about similar regions. This statistic reflects the situation of the 55,000-strong majority Cơ Tu hill community population of these areas.
- Đà Nẵng has a low rural population given its geography, and an average per capita income higher than the national average. Its poverty rate is low by national standards, reflecting its urban status; but is significantly higher than Hanoi's (0.1%) and Ho Chi Minh City's (0.0%).
- Some 30,000 households in Quảng Nam and 10,000 in Đà Nẵng are reported to qualify for government aid, according to information available in the local media.

An important perspective on what it means to live in poverty in Vietnam is through the lens of a vulnerability family. Individual family members may have a dearth of good health and nutrition, while the entire family may lack maternal and child care status, livelihood assets, and access to food, knowledge, health services, water, and sanitation (Vo and Tran 2022). The underlying dimensions of household well-being can determine how susceptible a vulnerable family is to both "idiosyncratic" shocks (those affecting individual households) and "covariate" shocks (those affecting whole communities).

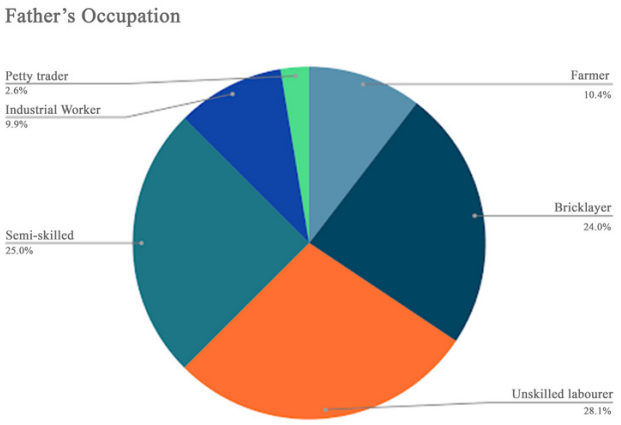
With very few exceptions, students in the Study Steps program come from families living in rural or periurban locations, having parents with low educational status who are engaged in farming, manual labour or low-end service economy work. They possess very few valuable household assets, and some households also carry debt, usually as a result of medical expenses. While as a rule they own their own houses, many live in structures that are poorly maintained or unhealthy as a result of not having funds to repair them. These characteristics mean they have low resilience and are highly vulnerable to livelihood shocks.

As seen in the charts below, the main shocks experienced by the families of Study Steps students are chronic illness and disruptions to employment or business activities caused by Covid-19. (The salience of Covid as a covariate shock reflects the fact that data was collected in 2021 for a number of the 174 households represented in the chart.) Loss of a parent due to divorce or death is also a significant driver of household instability, followed by loss of employment and accident. Beyond the impact of Covid-19 on people's ability to work, unstable income isn't included in this chart, since it's a near-universal condition faced by these families. Causes for disruption to income include seasonal factors, irregular availability of work, and individual fitness for work due to illness, injury or child care duties.

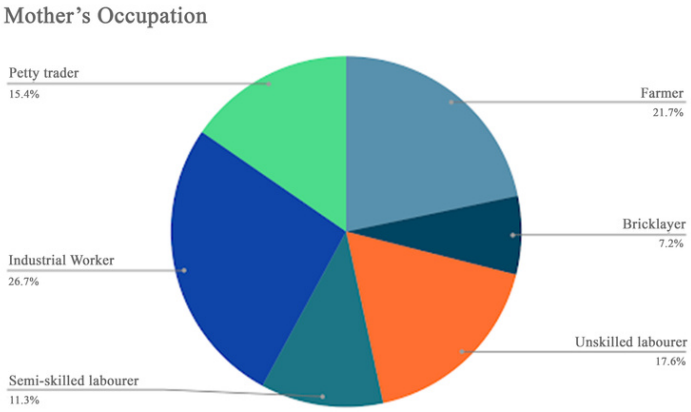
At the time of this writing (October 2023), Đà Nẵng and parts of Quảng Nam, including the uplands, are suffering significant flooding. This reminds us of the fact that coastal North Central and South Central Vietnam have the nation's highest levels of climate shocks, exposure to typhoons and tropical depressions. Livelihoods and socio-economic development in Quang Nam have been heavily affected by flooding in recent years, with the activities for work of tropical acacia (cây keo) cultivation and shrimp farming being heavily impacted (Vo and Tran 2022). Poor families in both rural and periurban areas are prone to suffer the effects of heavy rain and floods more severely as a result of living in poorly weatherproofed houses and living in flood-prone areas, where housing is cheaper.



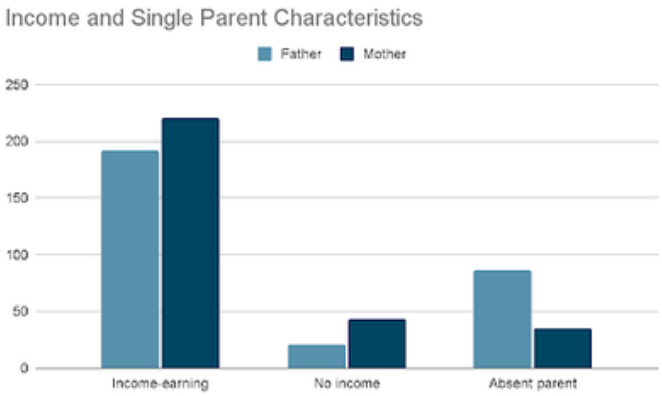
N = 174 housholds



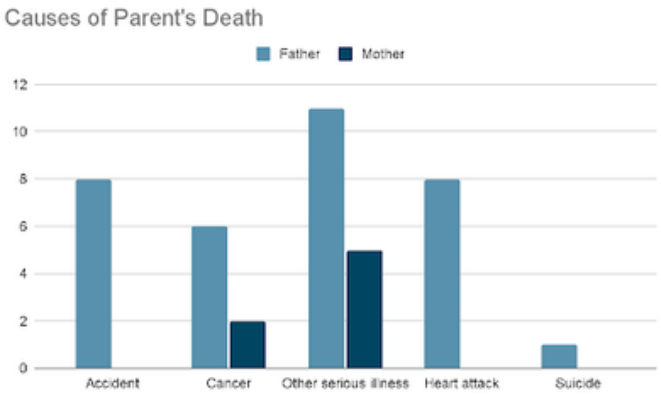
N = 192 fathers



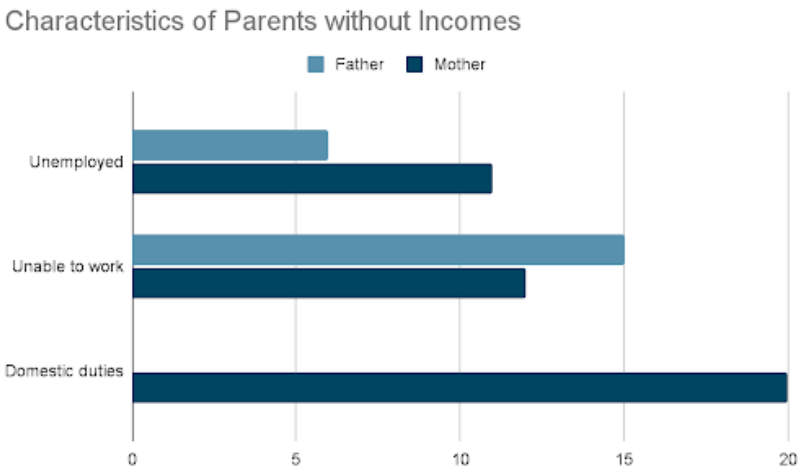
N = 221 mothers



N = 299 mothers and 299 fathers



N = 41



N = 64

Sketches of Study Steps Families

"Trúc" *is 13 years old. Her father wasn't present during her early childhood, and her mother has now remarried and moved away. Trúc lives with her maternal grandparents, who are both over 60. Her grandmother runs a modest bánh bèo restaurant, and her grandfather is a security guard. There are 7 people living in the house, and Trúc sleeps on a bamboo bench [chõng tre] on the front porch. Her desk is near the entrance to the restaurant, which at busy times is very noisy. Trúc helps at the restaurant sometimes, but thanks to support of Study Steps, she doesn't have to work long hours there. Without help from COV, Trúc thinks she'd still be able to attend school, but tells us "my life would be a lot harder".*

"Hoa" *is the youngest of four siblings, all of whom have their own families now. None of them is well off, but they make an effort to send 100,000 or 200,000 VND every now and then to help Hoa and her parents. Hoa lives with her mother and father in a rented house. Both are builder's labourers, and her father is currently working 500km away in the mountains up in Đắk Lắk, where the pay is better. Hoa is still in 7th grade even though she is 15 years old because she had to take two years off of school to recover after being seriously injured in a road accident.*

"Phương" *lives with her parents and grandmother, and is the eldest of three children. Her youngest brother, who is six years old, has cerebral palsy, and cannot move or speak. Her middle brother is in primary school. Phương's father is an industrial worker, and is the only breadwinner in the family. Her mother used to work as a seamstress, but gave it up to look after her disabled son full time.*

"Hải" *is a year 12 student who grew up in a rural commune not far from Hội An. His household is classified as near-poor, and has six members including: his paternal grandmother, father, mother, elder brother and younger sister. Hải's father is 63, and works as a builder's labourer and painter. His mother is 53, and has had to stop working as a seamstress because of high blood pressure and pain in her arms and legs. She stays at home and looks after Hải's grandmother, who is very frail and has lost her vision. Haỉ's sister is in year 9, and is an excellent student. His brother is a third year student in Information Technology at the University of Technology in Hồ Chí Minh City. Hải's father has to borrow money to pay for tuition fees for his son, and must scrimp and save to send money for food and accommodations. In the wet months of the rainy season, Hải's father can't work, and must borrow money from neighbours, paying them back whenever he can work again.*

"Uyên" *is 17 years old, and has been a Study Steps student since 2017. She also grew up in a rural commune, and lives in a five person household with her parents and two elder sisters. Her parents cultivate rice on 6 sào (around 3000m²) of paddy, and keep a herd of 20 goats. The family's income is highly unstable because of weather events, and they have often lost crops to flooding. Uyên's father is almost 50, and is limited in his labour power because he lost a hand in a farming accident. Even so, he still does ploughing work for other people, and works as a labourer to bring in some additional income. Uyên's mother also does temporary work in a textile factory in an industrial zone off highway 1.*

"Now, we children can't earn money to help our parents. The only way we have to show our gratitude is through our achievements at school, and trying to be recognised as outstanding students in every grade".

Hải - a student

"The assistance from COV has taken a lot of pressure off my family's finances. It's also given me a lot of mental support, helping me to feel secure and focus on my studies".

Uyên - a student

7

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF STUDY STEPS: AN EVALUATION

ADVANCEMENT AND COMPLETION

One of the clearest ways in which we can evaluate the social impact of the Study Steps program is to look at the rates of progression primary to upper secondary and tertiary education achieved by the students the program has supported.

For the general Vietnamese population, 59% of students will complete upper secondary school. The average rate of completion for students from rural areas is 47%, and for members of the lowest wealth quintile, the rate is 31%. For the sake of comparison, Hải Châu District in central Đà Nẵng has a rate of enrollment in upper secondary school of 73% (based on statistics supplied by the Hải Châu Office of Education and Training), and periurban Hòa Vang District sits at 66% (NB these figures are for enrolment rather than completion, the latter statistics not being available).

Study Steps students achieved a completion rate for upper secondary school of 86%, or 43 students from a cohort of 50 between 2019 and 2021. This is almost triple the average for those in the bottom wealth quintile, and higher than the rate for the students living in central Đà Nẵng. This same cohort achieved a tertiary education enrollment rate of 62%, almost double the national average of 35.4% (USAID 2023). This is especially significant, since the children of those in the bottom wealth quintile are practically absent in tertiary education in Vietnam today (World Bank 2022, pp. 11, 202).

These figures demonstrate an outstanding success for Children of Vietnam in helping children from severely impoverished backgrounds achieve access to education from 6th grade to high school graduation.

Richest	100%	98%	92%
Urban	98%	91%	75%
Total	98%	91%	59%
Rural	98%	85%	47%
Poorest	95%	67%	31%
Study Steps	NA	100%	87%
	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary

Secondary School Completion Rates. Adapted from Unicef data (UNICEF 2023).

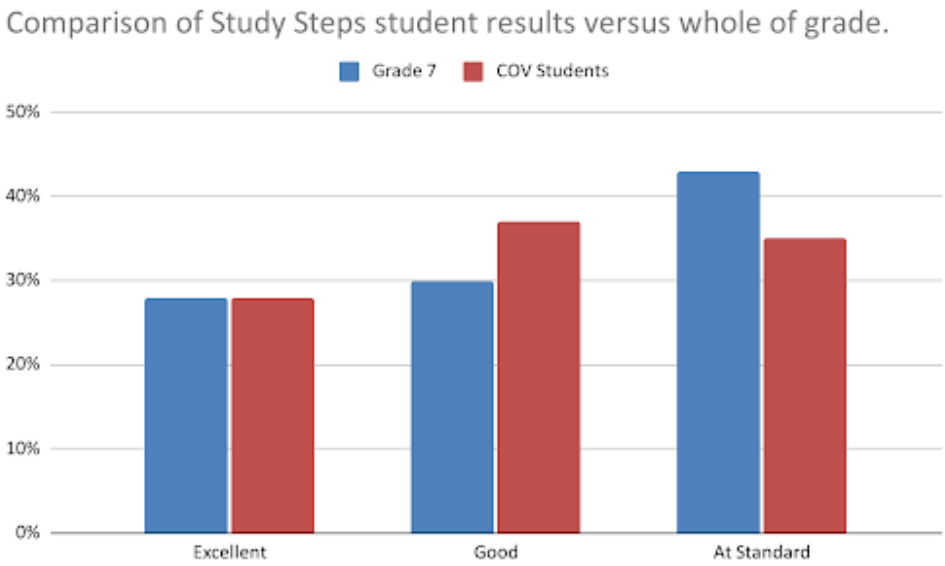
ACADEMIC RESULTS

For the graphs below, we compared the results of a cohort of 100 seventh-grade students in four Đà Nẵng schools, having similar overall school populations for the academic year, 2022-2023.

Only 35% of Study Steps students scored an "At Standard" total grade, in the general school population. 37% of COV students were in the "Good" category, outperforming their peers, who were at 30%. Finally, COV students were at parity with the general school population in the "Excellent" category, at 28%.

As discussed above, research shows that within Vietnamese schools, students from the poorest families are routinely outperformed by those from the richest (ADB, p. 83). The results achieved by the 2022-2023 cohort of Study Steps demonstrates a striking reversal of this trend, whereby they are at parity in the "Excellent" category, and significantly ahead of their peers in the "Good" and "At Standard" bands.

	No. Students	Excellent	Good	At Standard	Below Standard
Year 7 Peers	752	28%	30%	43%	0%
COV-Supported Students	100	28%	37%	35%	0%



LIFE SKILLS

As noted above, students attend one life skills class per semester, taught by professionals, such as psychologists and lecturers from the University of Education. The classes are delivered to groups of 25-28 students, allowing time for each student to interact with the teacher and to participate in discussions and activities. The classes are taught in a fun, dynamic and engaging style that students thoroughly enjoy. Teachers deploy a variety of methods, including experiential, participatory and peer learning, problem-solving, and role-play. Dr. Carruthers witnessed a class in which students confidently acted out a scenario concerning consent and strategies of refusal of a boyfriend's sexual advances in front of their classmates.

While these classes were initially only available to Study Steps students. Children of Vietnam has now opened them to all students in the same grade as their Study Steps peers (i.e. all 7th graders, in the case of the students we interviewed for this report). This is an excellent means of sharing the benefits of the program with a wider section of the school community, and represents a significant expansion. In the initial years of this program, life skills classes were taught only to a cohort of 100 Study Steps students. they are now offered to almost 850 students.

Life skills classes are still a relatively new concept in Vietnam, where teachers have traditionally assumed that moral and social education are the prerogative of the family. Contrary to this norm, life skills training was regarded positively by the school principals to whom we spoke. Our interviews with principals and students at three schools confirmed that the life skills topics and the novel approach to teaching them have excited the imaginations of students and teachers alike, positively influencing the pedagogic environment of the school, and encouraging the uptake of learner-centered teaching methods.

Indeed, life skills classes are prominently advertised on the websites of expensive international schools in Vietnam, and parents pay extra for teachers to provide these classes. They are a "luxury" that few public schools can offer, especially those in periurban and rural locations. Having such programs in their schools is clearly a source of pride to the Study Steps partner school communities.

"Principal A" commented how impressed she was that the "self-worth" workshop was taught by a psychologist with a Ph.D., and in addition, that students were served a "delicious meal". "It's so rare we can do something like that. There's no way the school can afford it."

This same principal emphasized that the online "safety" workshop was particularly useful, given the prevalence of social media and widespread anxiety about the perceived problem of game addiction. Principal A identified inequality in digital skills as a significant disadvantage faced by impoverished families. "Poor families typically don't have ICTs at home", she said, "and parents don't have the knowledge to teach their children about appropriate online behaviour".

Schools conduct follow-up conversations with students about the workshops, and principals reported that student comments were universally positive. Principal B shared how moved she was by the show of gratitude from a developmentally disabled student at being able to take part in the workshops. The student had messaged to say:

"Today's class was deeply meaningful to me. It was so wonderful!".

Other students communicated similar sentiments:

"Now I know my value, my strong and weak points, how to manage my emotions, I love life more!"

"I really want to do another class like this soon".

Principal B also noted how the "self-esteem" workshop had visibly boosted the confidence of students. Some previously have presented information in front of 400-500 classmates, and she was struck by the fact that children from Grades 6 and 7 could be so self-assured.

Principal C noted that the "self-worth" workshop "helped students to understand their own dreams", while a student we interviewed noted, "my best lesson from the "self-worth" class was to not compare myself with others".

Finally, **Principal C** noted that the program was well targeted and focused:
"7th and 8th grades are a time of rapid physiological change when students really need to find their way (định hướng) with guidance from family and from professionals."

TUTORING

As mentioned above, students receive special after-school tutorials in Mathematics, Literature and English (Toán - Văn - Anh) for a total of nine 45 minute sessions a week. These tutorials were taught by teachers employed at the partner school, who were remunerated by COV. As with the "life skills" workshops, these special tutorials are universally valued by principals and students, and more than one student nominated them as their favourite aspect of the program.

Principal A noted that the small number of students in the sessions (25) meant that teachers could focus on serving individual student needs. Better performing students could reinforce their knowledge, while those struggling could get tailored helped. She also emphasized the effectiveness of these sessions by noting proudly that there were some award-winning students in the COV cohort. As a result of the tutorial sessions, Study Steps was helping reverse the trend whereby students from the poorest families were outperformed by those from the richest within the same school community (ADB 2020, p. 83). This principal also noted that the in-school tutorials helped level the playing field, since better-off families could pay for private tutoring, while parents of Study Steps students typically couldn't.

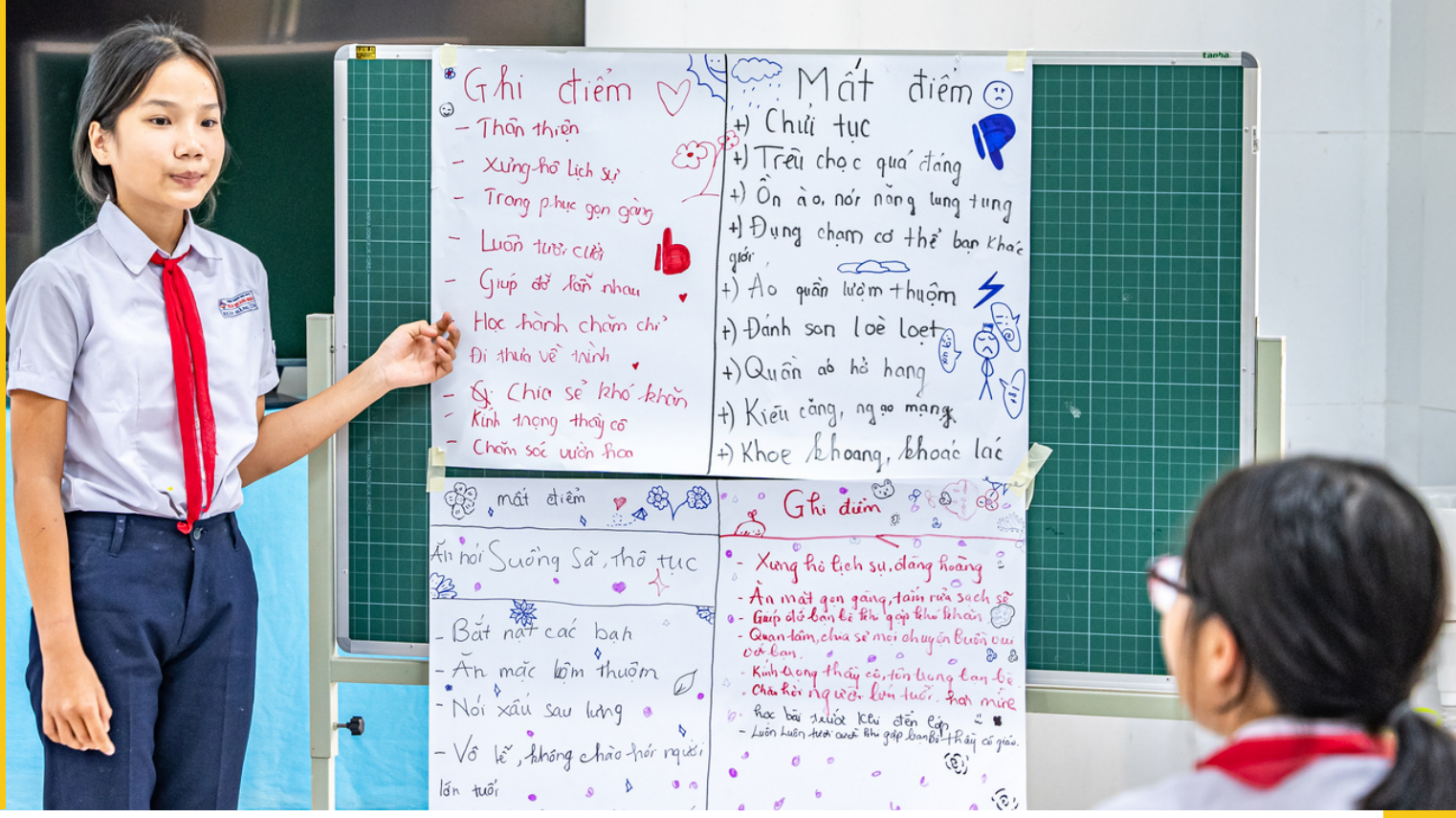
Student comments on these sessions were to the effect that they were highly appreciative of the chance to do extra study and be able to ask teachers questions in a small group. One mentioned enjoying time spent with her old teachers. Another noted that knowing she'd be able to ask for help later if she hadn't fully understood something taught in class lessened her anxiety about learning.

EXCURSIONS

After the “life skills” workshops, annual excursions were students' favourite aspect of the program. Our student interviewees mentioned being taken to a museum, the cinema and the global fast food chain, Jollibee. Our interviews indicated our students had not experienced fun excursions before first encounter with each of these institutions, and they talked about these experiences with intense excitement. Whatever is thought about the cultural value of watching Disney movies and eating at Jollibee, it’s worth noting that these everyday forms of global consumer culture are in fact exotic and unfamiliar to many young people from impoverished, periurban and rural backgrounds in Vietnam. Even though our interviewees don’t live geographically far from downtown Đà Nẵng (at most 15 km), our interviews showed that such sites of urban middle class consumption are something to which they have had minimal exposure. As well as being prohibitively expensive, we can assume that from the point of view of their farming and working class parents, these privileged places are socially intimidating. The parents lack the cultural capital to understand how to “use” such institutions, and to appear and feel at ease within them.

Cultural capital is an important dimension of class identity and status, and accumulating it is therefore part of the process of social mobility. By means of extra-mural excursions, COV is not only providing some end-of-year fun, but also giving students the opportunity to become familiar with the cosmopolitan spaces and consumer culture that are part of middle class life in the city. These experiences help the students integrate into university life alongside their more privileged peers from Đà Nẵng in the future.

Some of our student interviewees expressed a desire for the excursions to be more frequent, and were evidently excited to continue the journey of discovery. One even suggested that future destinations should be decided by a popular vote. Research on McDonald’s in its first years in China, for instance, demonstrated that consumers genuinely saw it as a portal to the global world, and as a potential first step in a journey of international study or migration (Yan 1997).



INTEGRATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Our interviews and participant observation demonstrated that Study Steps is extremely well integrated into the school communities that we visited. Neither principals nor students reported significant resentment, stereotyping or poverty-shaming from peers who were not beneficiaries of the program. “Tutor A” remarked, “While my students were at first a little embarrassed [mặc cảm] to be part of a program reserved for poor families, after a year or two they were really proud to be known as Study Steps students”.

Students we spoke to remarked that their fellow classmates were admiring and mildly envious of the Study Steps students, who “get to take special classes with their teachers, and go on excursions to Đà Nẵng to eat fried chicken and spaghetti.”
“Sướng nhỉ?" [You’re so lucky], remarked one friend.

In response to our question, “What would you do to improve the Study Steps program?”, students commented that they would like to see it expanded to include other classmates they know to be living in difficult circumstances; and (from a student in a girls-only cohort) to include male classmates.

Principal A noted that the Study Steps program helped the school become closer and better understood by the local community and understand their school population. This is mainly because the process of identifying eligible students requires co-operation and information-sharing between the school, local government, COV, and students’ families. Our interviews demonstrated that principals and teachers have a detailed awareness of the home situations of Study Steps students. “Tutor A”, for instance, spoke with emotion about how some of her students’ families are so poor they need to go out in the fields and catch snails after work in order to be sure the evening meal has enough nutrition. Staff also declared that they are aware of the exact number of students from families classified as “poor” and “near-poor” in their school communities.

8

FEEDBACK

EXTRA CLASSES

One unexpected discovery from our interviews was that some students' parents were paying for them to undertake extra tutoring (học thêm) after school, in addition to COV-supported tutoring. In almost all cases, these extra classes were in Mathematics, Literature and English - the same subjects covered in the COV tutorials. The students were already achieving excellent to outstanding results in these subjects, and yet their parents were spending scarce household resources on additional private classes.

In order to find out more about this discovery, we undertook a survey of 20 sets of parents, with the following findings:

- 15/20 sets of parents stated that they spent an average of 633,000 VND per month on after-school tutoring, with the highest-spending family paying 1.3 million.
- 14/15 parents said this expense was in fact "beyond their capacity".
- 13 sets of parents said, they "just wanted their kids to study an appropriate amount" while seven sets of parents said "the more they (their children) study the better".

One set of parents explained, "We are uneducated people, and we feel more at ease about the future knowing our child is taking these classes", while another commented, "We're worried about our kids getting addicted to games and social media. We feel more confident knowing they are at after-school classes".

These parent responses suggest that extra classes might be about more than just the curriculum. The first case hints at parents' anxiety that they themselves might be a poor influence on their brainy children, and thus prefer them to be in the company of educated people. (As researchers we find this rather horrifying! And offer some suggestions below as to how it might be addressed). For additional responses, we can perhaps detect a fear about children being exposed to negative influences in the local environment while parents work late in the fields or in factories. Meaning "It's safer to have kids at tutoring than to have them hanging around cafes staring at their smartphones, or running around to each others' houses". Tutor B added that for schools close to major roads such as hers, parents also worry about unsupervised children hit by cars or motorbikes.

We can speculate that parents might be feeling the pressure of local social competition, since sending one's children to after-school classes is seen as a prestigious activity, demonstrating both means and a commitment to education and social advancement. Support from COV may, ironically, be enabling parents to increase their private spending on education, thus bringing them more into parity with better off families in the community. While the amounts noted in our survey are small relative to the 5-6 million VND per child a middle class Đà Nẵng family may spend on extra classes per month, they are very large relative to the household incomes of these impoverished families.

COV should be conscious that giving support to families in the form of study materials and annual cash grants may have the unintended consequence of encouraging parents to spend money on private tutoring. Given that students already receive nine extra classes a week for free, additional classes are likely to be either redundant or in fact harmful, since students find themselves studying extremely long hours, and missing out on rest and leisure activities. Parents' belief in the need for extra classes may well reflect a lack of understanding about effective study habits and the need for recovery, and a general lack of familiarity with and anxiety about the academic culture of the school. We consider that there is a need for COV and partner schools to engage parents in a discussion about these issues, and to include them into the culture of the school community more fully.

If indeed it's the case that parents are sending children to private classes after school out of a desire for them to be in a safe and appropriate environment, COV might consider the idea of developing after-school clubs or activities, located either in local community spaces or in schools themselves. Students would have opportunities to engage in creative forms of exploration and leisure, such as art, music, yoga, sport, gardening, cooking and so on. Ideally, these spaces would encourage participation from parents and other community members, and allow them to pass on farming and working class skills and heritages that tend not to be recognized or validated in contemporary Vietnam's culture of schooling.

Teachers and students are already familiar with the concept of non academic activities outside of school hours, since schools periodically organise fun events on weekends. Tutor C was aware, through the media, of a "Big Brother Club" [Câu Lạc Bộ Anh Hai] for male students lacking role models or otherwise at risk. All three tutors we spoke to were positive about the idea of after-school clubs, and agreed they might be a good way of engaging parents.

Tutor A confirmed for us that parents from farming families don't typically participate in school activities. In her opinion this is because such events conflict with their working hours. Tutor C observed that parents from rural families do want to participate, but are busy working, and are shy [mặc cảm]. Tutor B noted that the Zalo (a Vietnamese version of WhatsApp) groups schools and COV use to keep in touch with parents are an excellent way to bridge the gap between schools and lesser educated parents. The indirect nature of these communications, she speculated, makes them less intimidating to farming families.

STUDENT WELLBEING

Our interviews revealed that some children indeed studying extremely long hours, and are putting undue pressure on themselves to constantly achieve high grades. Consider these exchanges:

AC: Do you feel pressure to succeed?
Student 1: It's not like there's pressure, but I want the organization and my parents to be proud of me. But I don't have the ability. Often I stay up late to study, till 11 PM or 12 AM. Then I get up at 5 AM to study. But often I just can't do it, I don't have the capacity. I want my family to be proud of me, other people to be proud of me. So I put myself in that position, but often I can't do it. So I feel that kind of pressure. I can't succeed [like I want to].
AC: What is it you can't succeed in?
Student 1: The things I set for myself. The goals are too high, beyond my ability. If I fail then I do it again, over and over, and I still can't succeed, it must be because of my ability.
AC: So what kind of grades do you usually get?
Student 1: 9/10

AC: How do you feel when you don't get the results you want?
Student 2: I'm really sad.
AC: Do you feel pressure to always succeed?
Student 2: Yes.
AC: What sort of grade would you be satisfied with?
Student 2: Higher than 8/10.

AC: What sort of grade would you be satisfied with?
Student 3: I might cry if I score below 9/10.

AC: What sort of hours do you study?
Student 4: After school, I do extra classes in maths and English, from 5:30 PM to 7 PM. When I have exams, I'll stay up until 10:30 PM and get up at 4:30 AM or 5 AM to keep working.

All of these students were performing extremely well at school, but had strong feelings about their results not being good enough. They are also studying very long hours, and one can assume that there is a great deal of redundancy and repetition of material between their regular classes, Study Steps tutorials, extra private classes, and their own process of revision.

We discussed this with teachers, and their responses suggested they saw extra classes and students putting pressure on themselves as more or less normal aspects of school life in Vietnam. “There is pressure”, remarked Tutor A, “but it’s not excessive [không đến nỗi quá tải]." Tutor A also felt that not many of her students were attending outside classes, since their parents wouldn’t be able to afford this expense. Tutor C remarked that if students were doing extra classes, tutors would be attuned to their stress and energy levels, and adjust their teaching style accordingly. “Those classes are really flexible”, he said. “If the students are tired, they will give them fun activities to do fun activities. It’s not all work”.

There are several ways to address this situation. One would be to create forums in which it can be more fully explained to students, parents and teachers that support from Study Steps is unconditional rather than performance-dependent. As COV staff explained to the students at the interviews gently explained to the students, the Study Steps program is meant to give them a fair chance to achieve their potential. They don’t have to constantly achieve high grades in order to prove they are worthy of being in the program, or to ensure continued support.

Another good approach would be to educate families and school staff about learning psychology and time-efficient study methods. The important role that forgetting plays in learning is by now well understood, as are the benefits of “spaced” rather than “massed” learning (cramming) (Brown 2014). Constant repetition and revision of familiar material is not only time-consuming, but can actually be counterproductive for long-term memory and permanent learning. Additionally, teachers and parents may need to be counselled about the importance of social learning, creative play and recreation in the process of education.

NEEDS AND WANTS IDENTIFIED BY PRINCIPALS AND STUDENTS

Expanding the Program

In our interviews, students and principals mentioned a number of needs and wants, most of which were along the lines of suggesting (or wishing for) expansions in the forms of support and novel ideas Study Steps had already brought to their school communities.

The Head of the Hòa Vang Education Office expressed the wish that COV support could be extended to all 11 lower secondary schools in his district (it currently covers 6). He described the Study Steps program as being “incredibly meaningful” for students in his district, noting the increased self- confidence a marked progression in self-confidence thanks to their academic success and what they learned in the “life skills” classes. He also noted the importance of the way COV “travelled alongside” [đồng hành] schools and students for three years in such a steadfast way, comparing it favourably to other donors, who make only sporadic contributions. The Head also noted the need to develop a vocational training pathway for the 30% of students in his district who don’t continue to upper secondary school. Currently, there is only a handful of small vocational colleges in Hòa Vang, not nearly enough to meet the needs of the district’s population.

Principal A mentioned that her school would love to have a full-time psychological counsellor, having seen the impact of the "self-worth" class on her 7th grade students. She also mentioned that the school staff lack the special skills needed to teach the six developmentally disabled students they have at the school.

Principal B was delighted that students at her school were enthusiastic about philanthropy and community service, as a result of seeing how the Study Steps program had helped their community. She wished all of her students could engage in volunteer activities.

Several principals and teachers expressed a desire to participate in teacher training and development so they can better engage in learner-centred pedagogy. While national education policy supports such training, actual opportunities for teachers in COV's partner schools have to date been limited or non-existent.

Principal C lamented the fact that staff at his school were only at the level of teaching English fundamentals, despite having some extremely talented students, and wished for some professional development of English language skills. He also hoped that one day they would have a number of scholarships for students showing promise in English, and that the school could organise summer camps and offer other English enrichment activities. "One or two sessions a week isn't enough," he sighed. Tutor B also noted that teaching English was a particular challenge for children of families with less educated parents living in rural and periurban localities.

We agree that the cultural contexts of English usage are distant and unfamiliar for people living in poverty, where global consumer culture and media are only minimally present, and having international friends and family members are highly unusual. In very privileged urban families, by contrast, it's not unusual for parents to speak English with their children rather than Vietnamese at home to ensure their fluency. The inability of poor parents to speak English in Vietnam is a significant form of social inequality, further disadvantaging students from poor backgrounds in an education system in which English is one third of a trinity of "core" subjects including Mathematics and Literature [Toán - Văn - Anh]. "Only those with a real passion for English can succeed", Tutor B noted, adding that flexible teaching methods and materials tailored to individual needs are lacking.

Gender Policy

In partner schools hosting the girls-only Study Steps cohorts, we were told several times that it was a shame the program wasn't open to male students. This was the closest thing to a criticism we heard in the course of our interviews. We reflected that the development-related and feminist rationales behind Study Steps' policy focusing on girls might not be well understood by all in the school communities. (Tutor A, by contrast, commented that the focus on girls in her school's cohort was "totally appropriate", since "girls face special risks".)

While campaigns for gender equity in education in the developing world have been highly visible in the media, and this is a pressing problem in many nations, we believe there is good reason for COV to examine whether this policy is still well attuned to Vietnam's current context of gender equity (UN Women 2021).

As discussed above, Vietnam now has a reverse gender gap in terms of academic performance and participation, continuing from lower secondary through to the end of upper secondary education. Among the ethnic Vietnamese population, boys and girls are at equal risk of dropping out of school (UNICEF 2022, p. 37, Tran 2022). Arguably in this context, it is not necessary for COV to continue to focus on girls simply to ensure access to education. Rather, COV might like to consider whether there are other ways to invest resources towards areas in which gender equity is still far off.

Vietnam has much progress to make in terms of gender equality, but has been slowly improving its gender parity score since 2007, when it was first included in the World Economic Forum's Gender Parity Index. It currently scores 71.1% with a global rank of 72nd. Women earn 81.4% of men's estimated earned income, and labour-force participation parity is at 88.1%. Some preference, leading to a skewed sex ratio at birth, is one of Vietnam's lowest performing gender parity indicators (WEF 2023). Only 25.6% of senior officials are women, but there are signs this is improving. As of 2023, Vietnam boasts three female ministers, and around 30% of the deputies of the 15th National Assembly are women (vietnamnews.vn 2023).

While the World Economic Forum reports there is in the number of women working in technology in Vietnam, our research of COV's Bright Scholars program for university students found that women were very poorly represented in Science and Technology degrees. On the other hand, they outnumber men three to one in enrolments in the Đà Nẵng Economics University, reflecting Vietnam's relatively good economic opportunity and participation index. With this in mind, COV might consider whether it makes sense to develop programs to mentor women in the fields of science, technology, leadership and entrepreneurship.

Defining Poverty

The wish most expressed by students and principals in our interviews was that Study Steps should be expanded to help more students from poor backgrounds in their school communities. Principal A noted that there were many needy students in her school from families just above the official poverty line, who therefore don't qualify for assistance. This is a common situation nationwide, a function of the fact that the poverty line has been set quite low by international standards, and the measurement process tends to be arbitrary and haphazard (Lincoln 2023, p. 117). Sociologically speaking, "poor" households don't represent a distinct class of people. Rather, it's best to understand them as members of a larger class of vulnerable rural and low-skilled urbanites who have simply fallen on bad luck or difficult circumstances.

In terms of offering support to students whose families don't officially qualify as poor or near-poor, we observed that COV already has supplementary criteria for determining eligibility, such as the policy of giving preferential support to single mother families, those with several school-aged children, and those with members living with chronic illness and disability. Nevertheless, it appears that local authorities are most likely to rely on official categorisations when introducing COV staff to potential clients in the first instance, since these families are easily identified, and lifting them out of poverty is a local policy priority. COV staff chooses from among these "officially poor" families based on the additional criteria outlined above.

On the topic of defining poverty in Vietnam, anthropologist Martha Lincoln observes:

"Social assistance in Vietnam particularly fails to serve moderately poor households, households above the poverty line, and, because they are more likely to be informally employed, women. It also misses the nation's uncounted, but large population of rural-to-urban migrants, many of whom are not formally registered in the hộ khẩu system and are thus ineligible for social benefits." (Lincoln 2023, p. 119)

Thus, where possible COV should aim to strengthen its capacity to make independent, case-specific assessments of eligibility rather than relying solely on pre-existing categories and official introductions.

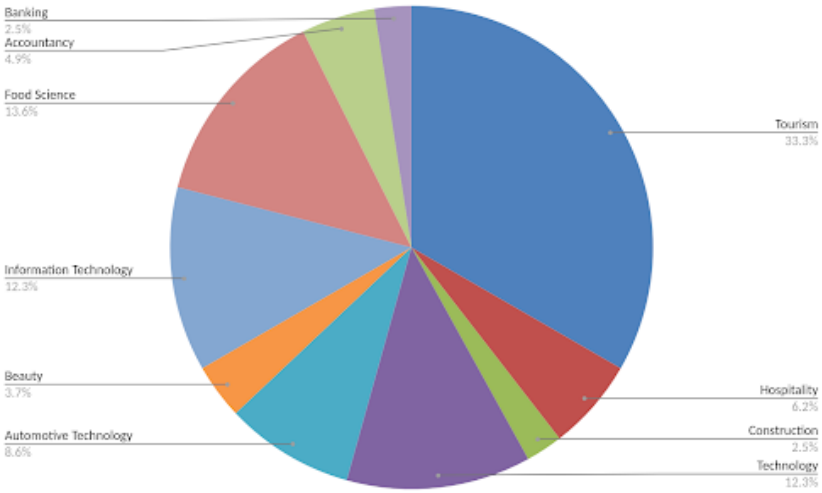
OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Active Commuting

Since COV is providing bicycles to students, and safety on the road to and from school is a concern of both parents and teachers, it may be appropriate for COV to engage school communities and local People's Committees in identifying and marking safe routes, and educating drivers about safe behaviour around vulnerable child bikers.

Vocational Training and Advice

Not all Study Steps students wish to continue to upper secondary school, but choose to undertake vocational training instead. The graphic below, based on data from 81 Study Steps students, shows the breakdown of courses these students have chosen.



Vocational course choices of 81 Study Steps students

In the course of our research for this report, several stakeholders mentioned to us the need to develop clearer vocational pathways for less academically inclined Study Steps students. While a full investigation of this is outside the scope of the current report, we recommend that COV should engage students, parents, teachers, potential employers and local officials in discussions, and seek to identify areas in which COV can make a contribution, e.g. in terms of career advice, early intervention and building partnerships with vocational colleges.

9

CONCLUSION

Education is a proven path to social advancement in Vietnam, but the children of the very poor are significantly disadvantaged in terms of completion rates and performance. Lack of educational opportunities substantially increases the risk that disadvantageous family circumstances will be reproduced in the next generation, and talented children will be caught in a poverty trap that prevents them from maximising their own potential and achieving social mobility. Enabling children from impoverished families to remain in school and perform to their full capacity is without doubt the best way to break the poverty cycle and give them a chance at equality within Vietnam's post-reform opportunity structure. Children of Vietnam is succeeding spectacularly well in enabling children from the poorest families to access and complete upper secondary and tertiary education, and to perform to their fullest potential academically. Through "life skills" classes, excursions and other means of support, it is also doing much to equip young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with "extracurricular cultural capital". Alongside academic qualifications, these forms of cultural know-how constitute a repertoire of soft skills necessary to achieve social mobility and succeed in middle class urban society.

Our interviews demonstrated that participants in the program, including students, parents, principals and teachers, are universally positive and appreciative. All expressed an ardent desire for the benefits of the program to be extended, given the resources, to wider segments of their school communities.

In terms of suggestions for improving and developing the program, we identified students putting too much pressure on themselves, and studying too many hours, as potential problems to be further investigated. Our recommendation is that COV engage school communities in discussions about healthy study habits and efficient study methods. It may also be appropriate to investigate whether non-academic after school clubs could be a useful intervention.

Given that there is now a reverse gender gap in secondary schooling in Vietnam, we raised the question of whether Study Steps should reconsider the policy of focusing on girls when choosing eligible students. Our reasoning is that, among the ethnic Vietnamese demographic Study Steps supports, girls are at lesser risk than boys of dropping out of secondary school. We noted there is a slight perception of unfairness in partner school communities about the policy of focusing on girls, and suggested that interventions for gender equality might be better aimed at areas in which gender parity remains a distant prospect. Women's leadership and STEM programs are one suggestion.

Finally, we suggested that COV consider whether it is appropriate to take a more critical perspective on official definitions of poverty, and the role these play in the process of identifying of eligible families, mediated as it is by local authorities. Does this process allow COV to effectively apply Its own, nuanced and context-sensitive criteria for determining whether a family is eligible for assistance?

10

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