Curriculum Reform in Vietnam: Teacher Autonomy and the Reality of Its Implementation in Classrooms

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Abstract. This study investigates how the teacher autonomy granted by the General Education Program (GEP) 2018 reform policies is implemented in real classroom environments in Vietnam. Teacher autonomy is critical in enhancing educational innovation and fostering student-centered learning in Vietnam. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation, including 20 primary school teachers from various regions in central Vietnam, all of whom had experience teaching under the GEP 2018. This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative focus group interviews with these teachers and quantitative survey data to validate findings. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of autonomy and the challenges they face in implementing the GEP 2018, providing insights to bridge the gap between policy and practice. The results show that many teachers find increased autonomy challenging due to unclear guidance, heavier workloads, and insufficient support, which undermines the reform's goal of empowerment. The study highlights the need for clear guidance, better training, and systemic support to align policy with classroom practice.

Keywords: curriculum development; General Education Program 2018; teacher autonomy; Vietnamese language subject

1. Introduction

The General Education Program (GEP) 2018, introduced by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), represents a significant shift from the 2006 program, moving from a content-focused approach to a goal-oriented framework aimed at enhancing the quality of education (MOET, 2018). This new approach emphasizes the development of students' moral values and competencies, including patriotism, compassion, diligence, honesty, and

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responsibility. It encourages teachers to experiment with innovative teaching methods and to embrace a sense of professional responsibility. By granting teachers more flexibility in curriculum design and material selection, the GEP 2018 aims to empower them to create customized lessons rather than solely implementing pre-designed ones. However, this increased autonomy has raised concerns about teachers' ability to manage their new responsibilities, and responses have been mixed. Many teachers report feeling overwhelmed by unclear guidelines, increased workloads, and limited support from educational authorities (Fullan, 2007; Helsby, 2000; MOET, 2022).

Curriculum reform and teacher autonomy have been widely discussed, but little is known about how Vietnamese teachers perceive and respond to these changes, particularly in the context of the 2018 GEP. Previous studies (French et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2023) have highlighted the lack of evidence and unclear recommendations regarding these reforms. Findings indicate that Vietnamese teachers struggle to increase their autonomy due to inadequate training and insufficient formal support. Although Goodson's (2003) and Fullan's (2007) frameworks emphasize the need to balance teacher autonomy with external pressures, there is no data on how this balance is achieved or which support systems are most effective in Vietnam. This study addresses this gap by examining primary school teachers' perspectives on GEP 2018, their authority, the challenges they face, and the support they receive. The results aim to inform policymakers on improving the implementation of curricular reforms in Vietnam. Understanding what supports or hinders curriculum change requires consideration of teachers' perspectives (Flores, 2004; Fullan, 2007). This study investigates how Vietnamese primary school teachers manage the additional professional autonomy introduced by the GEP 2018. It examines their challenges in meeting curriculum goals, especially in Vietnamese language instruction. By exploring these experiences, the study addresses the gap between reform intentions and classroom realities. It also underscores the importance of a balanced system that offers teachers autonomy, clear guidance, and adequate resources (Goodson, 2003; MOET, 2022). Such a balanced approach may help policymakers make more informed decisions regarding educational reform by providing valuable insights into the process.

Accordingly, this research addressed two key questions:

1) How do primary school teachers perceive the increased autonomy granted by the GEP 2018 reform?
2) What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing the GEP 2018 curriculum in the classroom, particularly within the Vietnamese language subject?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Synthesis of Research on Teacher Challenges in GEP 2018 Implementation

The GEP 2018 marks a significant shift from the 2006 curriculum by emphasizing goal-oriented learning rather than content-focused instruction. The program fosters patriotism, friendliness, diligence, honesty, and responsibility (MOET, 2018, 2022). To enhance teacher autonomy, the reform empowers teachers to customize and design their lessons instead of strictly following a predetermined curriculum. Studies suggest several issues must be addressed for the GEP 2018 to function effectively. According to Nguyen and Walkinshaw (2018), teachers struggled with increased autonomy due to unclear regulations, excessive workloads, and a lack of support from school management. A review by the National Assembly Standing Committee on Education (MOET, 2022) found that principals who were expected to facilitate these changes did not fully understand their new roles, partly because senior leaders did not provide sufficient support. This lack of support negatively impacted teachers and principals, leading to varying degrees of success in implementing the program across schools.

Pham et al. (2023) found that many teachers were unaware of the additional teaching options provided by the new curriculum. Although they understood the importance of using diverse teaching methods after being instructed, they faced challenges implementing them. French et al. (2023) reported difficulties with the new administration method of the GEP 2018, noting that some leaders found creating appropriate content time-consuming. Both studies observed that teachers often relied too much on materials issued by the Ministry, which limited their creativity. Teachers also lacked the support and training needed to perform their duties effectively. While the GEP 2018 provides teachers with greater autonomy, the lack of explicit support structures and professional development opportunities remains a significant challenge. Teachers need targeted support and training to manage curriculum changes effectively, helping to align policymakers' intentions with the realities of classroom implementation.

2.2 Teacher Autonomy: A Theoretical Perspective

Teacher autonomy is at the heart of the GEP 2018 in Vietnam, aligning with the global trend of improving education by giving teachers greater responsibility and professionalism (Fullan, 2007). This reform transforms the curriculum from content-based to goal-based, allowing teachers to design lessons and increase professional autonomy. However, implementing these concepts has led to increased administrative tasks and insufficient support, making it more difficult for teachers to apply them effectively in the classroom (Flores, 2004). Goodson's (2003) model of change identifies three main forces influencing curriculum change: internal, external, and individual. Internal forces, such as teacher autonomy and professional authority, facilitate change by encouraging teachers to innovate and respond to new pedagogical developments. In contrast, external forces often push teachers into passive roles, reducing their active participation in reform efforts—a phenomenon Goodson describes as a "*status crisis*" (Goodson, 2003). Individual forces, including teacher commitment, creativity, and personal investment, are crucial to successful change but are often underestimated. Achieving a balance between these forces is essential to fostering genuine teacher

engagement and effective curriculum implementation (Goodson, 2003). According to Hargreaves et al. (2001), curriculum change is challenging and requires teachers' intellectual and emotional engagement. Emotional factors, particularly those based on teacher relationships, significantly influence how they respond to changes. Teachers must connect reform concepts to their aspirations to create lasting improvements. Fullan (2007) identifies three key elements for successful educational reform: new materials, innovative teaching methods, and changes in underlying beliefs. While changes in materials and methods are straightforward, altering teachers' deep-seated beliefs is more challenging but essential for meaningful reform. This process, known as *reculturation*, involves building a shared understanding among stakeholders to support sustainable transformation.

Phung et al. (2020) identified challenges with GEP 2018, emphasizing teachers' struggles with unclear responsibilities, insufficient support, and reluctance to adopt proactive roles due to increased workloads. Their study concluded that specialized training was essential for effective curriculum implementation. In contrast, our study further reveals that teachers perceive increased autonomy as a double-edged sword: while it provides flexibility, it also introduces significant stress. Specifically, 65% of teachers in our research highlighted the overwhelming demands of assessment and evaluation, which they view as burdensome rather than empowering. Unlike Phung et al. (2020), our findings show that even when training was offered, it often lacked practical applicability, leaving teachers ill-equipped for the realities of classroom implementation. This highlights a more complex interplay between autonomy, accountability, and the need for practical support in curriculum reform.

3. Methods and Procedures
3.1 Research Design
This study employed qualitative research to explore teachers' opinions on curriculum revisions. In addition to qualitative methods, the study utilized quantitative methods through surveys to collect numerical data on teachers' perceptions and experiences, allowing for statistical validation of the qualitative findings. Focus groups were the primary data collection methods, as they promote active participation and capture diverse perspectives (Wilkinson, 2009). Fullan (2007) emphasized the human aspect of educational development, and this approach aligns with that focus, illustrating how Vietnamese teachers navigate complex curricular changes. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) suggest using focus groups to understand environmental factors influencing teacher change, making this method particularly suitable for the study's objectives.

3.2 Research Participants
This study included 20 primary school teachers from central Vietnam (Hue, Da Nang, and Quang Tri), selected through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. Participants met the following criteria: (1) direct experience teaching under GEP 2018, (2) at least five years of teaching experience and one year implementing the new curriculum, (3) holding a bachelor's degree or higher, and (4) representing diverse school contexts (urban,

suburban, and rural). Purposive sampling was chosen to gather in-depth insights from participants with relevant knowledge and experience, as it prioritizes data richness over generalizability (Creswell, 2013). While this sampling method provides valuable qualitative insights, it is important to note that the findings are not intended to be generalized to the broader population. Focus group interviews, conducted in Vietnamese, encouraged open discussion. Two researchers analyzed data using thematic coding to ensure reliability and capture diverse perspectives. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1: Distribution of the research sample based on level of education, years of teaching experience, and school in central Vietnam

Criterion	Characteristics	Number	Valid percentage
Level of education	Bachelor's degree	10	50
	Advanced pedagogical certification	7	35
	Other (e.g., specialized vocational training or foreign qualifications)	3	15
Years of experience in teaching	1-2 years	5	25
	3-4 years	6	30
	4-5 years	4	20
	More than 5 years	5	25
School	Nguyen Hue Primary School	7	35
	Quang Trung Primary School	7	35
	Le Loi Primary School	6	30
Educational district	Hue	8	40
	Da Nang	7	35
	Quang Tri	5	25

3.3. Instrument
Focus group interviews were the most essential data collection method. Wilkinson (2009) describes focus groups as "*engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion, 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues*" (p. 177). This method uses group dynamics to allow people to respond to each other's ideas, offer diverse perspectives, and encourage or challenge each other. This improves data and educates people (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Each hour-long Vietnamese interview provided a natural and safe venue for participants to discuss. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2009), the researchers managed the interactions to stimulate data flow while limiting their capacity to modify the direction. The interview data was categorized data-driven, meaning the categories were chosen as the transcripts were read. This ensured that no minor topics were missed and that the broader themes caught the important data trends (Gibbs, 1997).

3.4 Validity and Reliability Tests

Several methodologies were utilized to ensure the study's validity and reliability. The interview questions were tested with a different set of teachers to ensure clarity and appropriateness, as proposed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2009). Researchers employed triangulation to compare focus group data, enhancing the results' trustworthiness. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) claim that the power of qualitative research lies in the richness of data from group interaction, where combined outputs offer more knowledge than individual inputs. Additionally, member verification improves qualitative data reliability (Creswell, 2013). Participants reviewed preliminary findings and provided feedback during follow-up interviews, ensuring accurate interpretation of their perspectives and resolving discrepancies in the thematic coding process. Uniform coding throughout data analysis increased confidence in results. Two researchers analyzed the transcripts separately using thematic analysis to uncover themes around teacher autonomy and program implementation issues. Following Brinkmann and Kvale's (2009) stringent technique, code conflicts were resolved by discussion and agreement. This was necessary for fair and orderly research. Gibbs (1997) believes that collaborative data coding and analysis highlight the importance of reflexivity and group debriefing in qualitative research, ensuring that the findings accurately represent participants' experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

The GEP 2018 provided teachers with additional latitude, which this study examined. Maintaining discourse consistency was difficult because data categories were complicated and often interrelated. These elements were interconnected, illustrating the intricate nature of teachers' responses to curricular revisions. The qualitative material alongside the results was examined in the next section. To protect privacy, translated and anonymized quotes were utilized to present findings. These quotes were shortened using "meaning condensation". More extended interview excerpts were condensed into shorter passages to capture more information succinctly. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive conversation. Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) suggested using meaning condensation to identify meaning units and clarify significant thematic groups. This strategy preserved the participants' primary features and unique qualities while revealing the teachers' perspectives and how they perceived their roles in the classroom during the research.

4.1 Responding to Expanded Freedom

The results demonstrate that teachers do not describe the new curriculum's improved flexibility as "true freedom" but agree that there is more professional autonomy. However, curriculum goals and implementation challenges might make autonomy hard to recognize. Sixty-five percent of teachers report being stressed by extensive testing and evaluation procedures, suggesting that autonomy usually leads to more responsibility than professional freedom (Tran & Nguyen, 2024). Phan et al. (2023) found that curriculum clarity, resources, and administrative support influence teachers' autonomy attitudes. Hargreaves et al. (2001) noted that external accountability difficulties make teachers feel less free, increasing stress and burnout. They explained that teachers who struggle to

combine autonomy and duty often experience emotional stress and reduced performance (p. 23). Additionally, excessive review burdens can lead to workplace anxiety and dissatisfaction. According to the authors, teachers' perceptions of their leadership significantly affect their psychological distress and burnout, particularly during periods of transformation.

Participant A said:
> "*I am worried that teachers might become anxious about the required extensive measurement and assessment — it is truly daunting. Students are now expected to accomplish skill goals and apply their knowledge. Instead of teaching spelling, storytelling, vocabulary expansion, reading, and writing practice, we should focus on teaching reading, writing, speaking, and listening. We were bewildered and unsure about this adjustment.*"
>
> (A, personal communication, November 15, 2023)

Later, B commented:
> "*The downside is that there is a constant need for evaluation. I work hard to get things right to avoid blame for not doing my job properly.*"
>
> (B, personal communication, September 30, 2023)

These observations underscore the complex implications of increased autonomy, such as decision-making ability, heightened responsibility, concerns about meeting expectations, and an increased focus on evaluation and record-keeping. According to Nguyen, T. C. (2024), 80% of teachers believed that these regulations had become a significant issue that undermined their autonomy. This indicates that teachers' experiences differ from policymakers' intentions to promote professional autonomy, highlighting the inherent conflict between autonomy and accountability.

A and other teachers have noticed a change from content-focused to outcome-based learning. Phan (2024) reports that 75% of teachers are overloaded and do not understand the reform's basic principles after four years. This holds even more true as more teachers embrace the new curriculum's ideals. Goodson (2003) emphasizes balancing intellectual and emotional labor to achieve fair and adequate school change. The results suggested that teachers often view the GEP 2018 change's greater professional autonomy as a burden rather than a liberation. The emphasis on testing and responsibility, which many teachers viewed as onerous and unneeded, gives people this impression. Instead of professional empowerment, more autonomy may lead to more stress and work without proper aid, advice, and resources (see Hargreaves et al., 2001; Phan et al., 2023). Similar studies have shown that greater autonomy can lead to professional burnout rather than empowerment without adequate support. However, research by Marshik et al. (2017) suggest that autonomy-supportive teaching can enhance job satisfaction and improve student outcomes when combined with emotional and structural support. Planning and implementing these adjustments can be difficult for everyone. Goodson (2003) found that adapting to new expectations requires intellectual and emotional engagement. Teachers experience anxiety and dread of failing standards. Comprehending their problems requires comprehending these

feelings. Additional professional identity crises can cause anxiety, perplexity, and loss of control. This could negate the benefits of the curriculum change. According to Hargreaves et al. (2001), teaching is naturally emotional. The study demonstrates that emotional factors must be included for change to work.

The shift towards outcomes-based education has necessitated the recording and analysis of every aspect of student performance, thereby reducing flexibility and creativity in teaching. Many teachers reported that this shift has increased the emphasis on administrative tasks, which, in turn, has diminished student independence—one of the core objectives of the reform. Consequently, some teachers suggested policymakers reconsider how autonomy is implemented to prevent increased responsibility without adequate support. They argue that helping teachers balance autonomy with program implementation requires more transparent regulations and better resource allocation. There is often a significant gap between the intentions of policymakers and the realities of classroom practice. This highlights the importance of involving teachers in the planning and implementation of reforms to ensure that empowerment policies do not inadvertently place additional burdens on them.

4.2 From Policy to Practice

The shift from a prescriptive, content-focused curriculum to an objective-based framework emphasized teacher autonomy. This was the primary cause of significant difficulties during the transition from the 2006 curriculum to the GEP reform 2018 (Phan et al., 2023). The GEP 2018 mandates that instructors take on the role of curriculum developers, thereby ensuring that the overarching objectives of the curriculum are translated into practical classroom applications. This is in contrast to the curriculum implemented in 2006, which offered specific guidance on content and methodology. Seventy-five percent of instructors who participated in this research said they felt overwhelmed by these obligations. They were forced to adapt and alter the curriculum with little support or explicit instructions (Flores, 2004; Nguyen, T. C., 2024). This shift underscores the complex dynamics of curriculum implementation, where teachers are positioned not just as implementers but as active agents of change, often lacking adequate resources or professional development opportunities (Fullan, 2007; van den Bergh et al., 2014).

Our findings revealed a significant disconnect between the policy intentions of GEP 2018 and the practical realities experienced by teachers. Policymakers intended for teachers to engage deeply with the curriculum outside the classroom—deducing, clarifying, and designing customized curricula. However, 80% of teachers indicated that most of this negotiation happens within the classroom, where they feel pressured to meet curriculum objectives without sufficient preparation time (Nguyen, T. C., 2024). This gap is reflected in teachers' feedback:

> *"This is exhausting, and at times, we feel overwhelmed by the demands from the MOET and the officials who provided us with the GEP 2018. It sometimes feels like we are completely lost. There is so much to manage; those who created these reforms should step into our shoes and see what we face."*

(A, personal communication, November 15, 2023)

"*There is a significant gap between their expectations and our reality. In my third-grade class, I have 45 children, each from a unique background and has special requirements. Without mentioning the different traits that the kids have, it is tough to meet all the goals.*"

(C, personal communication, October 21, 2023)

Without mentioning the different traits that the kids have, it is tough to meet all the goals. Existing study shows that when teachers are asked to change the curriculum, they often feel a range of emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and a lack of connection with the policy's goals (Goodson, 2003; Hargreaves et al., 2001; van den Bergh et al., 2014). The fact that these reflections match the results of this study shows that these reactions align with the results of other studies. The study's results showed how hard it was for teachers to find a balance between the big goals of education and the classroom's specific needs. Sixty-five percent of teachers said that not having clear instructions and help was a big reason they were unhappy with the new curriculum, which was very different from the program in place in 2006. Despite the absence of models and training, teachers were still required to develop specific lesson plans, assessment criteria, and teaching methods. D, one of the teachers, expressed his concerns, saying, "*I wish we had access to examples of tests that demonstrated the expected standards of learning outcomes — what exactly does the competency look like?*" (D, personal communication, January 14, 2024).

This situation is like more significant problems written about in the literature on educational change. For example, changes are often forced on teachers from the outside and do not meet their needs, so they comply passively without really caring (Flores, 2004; Fullan, 2007). Goodson (2003) calls this the "*crisis of positionality*" (p. 45), which happens when teachers feel like they do not have as much power when they are just following the rules instead of actively shaping changes in the classroom. Only 30% of teachers had enough training to handle the complicated GEP 2018. The data suggest that a lack of professional support exacerbates teachers' reluctance to embrace their roles as change agents fully. Most teachers told Phan (2024) that they needed more structured guidance, more precise test standards, and access to professional learning groups to share their methods and get feedback. Flores (2004) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) say that this result fits with studies done worldwide that show how important continuing professional development and working together networks are for changing the curriculum in a way that works.

Concerning teachers' experiences with GEP 2018, the outcomes showed a big difference between how people thought the change would happen and how it did. It was still more important to most teachers to meet the needs of their students than to think about the bigger goals of the change. The people who made the rules thought teachers would agree with the subject material, but most did not. This research showed the importance of a stronger framework with focused professional development, clear directions, and tools to help teachers make the curriculum goals a reality. Policymakers should think about giving teachers more

real-life examples, testing tools, and ongoing professional support. This could help teachers feel more confident in their new roles and help close the achievement gap. There is a big difference between policy and practice that needs to be closed so that the change in the curriculum is not just a goal but a fact in the classroom.

4.3 Freedom Granted, Freedom Questioned: Teachers' Experiences Under GEP 2018

The goal of the GEP 2018 was to give teachers more freedom in planning and carrying out their lessons. This would help them feel more skilled and give them a sense of independence. Our study showed that this unrestricted freedom is more challenging to achieve than it seems, and teachers often get it wrong. As a result of the study's findings, 70% of educators said that the increased autonomy made their jobs more difficult rather than easier. They often cited reasons such as not having sufficient time, having an excessive amount of assessment work, and not receiving sufficient assistance from the school administration.

The quantitative data shed light on teachers' significant challenges when managing their time, particularly in the lower primary grades. A total of 65% of those who participated in the survey stated that they had difficulty fulfilling the curriculum's competence goals within the allotted teaching time of thirty-five minutes per lesson, with forty-three lessons per week. These limitations were challenging to address in the early grades, as kids require additional time to adjust to the structured learning environment (Phan et al., 2023). One participant, D, noted:

> "*With only 35 minutes per lesson, there is not enough time to meet the competence goals in the Vietnamese subject curriculum. Young children also need time to adjust to the learning environment, which creates a gap between the ambitious goals and the reality of the classroom. As a result, students are falling behind, and this problem only worsens as time goes on.*"
>
> (D, personal communication, November 15, 2023)

This observation aligns with studies emphasizing the disconnect between curriculum demands and available instructional time, highlighting the need for curriculum pacing that better matches students' developmental stages (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tran & Nguyen, 2024).

The data also indicated that 80% of teachers felt overwhelmed by the number of assessments, including city-level, diagnostic, and weekly tests, which they viewed as encroaching on instructional time and overshadowing the learning process. E, a participant, expressed concern about this imbalance:

> "*I believe we might be focusing too much on defining learning objectives and assessments to the point where it overshadows the actual content and the learning process. If you keep pouring water into a bucket, eventually it will overflow.*"
>
> (E, personal communication, December 16, 2023)

Teachers' comments reflected the broader literature on the negative impact of excessive assessment demands on teaching quality. The focus on testing can detract from meaningful engagement with subject content (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2001). Research suggests that excessive assessment and documentation requirements can undermine teacher autonomy by shifting their focus from creative pedagogy toward procedural compliance (Goodson, 2003; Flores, 2004).

The qualitative responses illustrated a significant misalignment between the intended and perceived autonomy among teachers. Although policymakers designed GEP 2018 to empower teachers as curriculum developers, only 25% of respondents felt they genuinely gained autonomy in their professional roles. Most teachers perceived the increased autonomy as an added responsibility rather than an opportunity for professional growth (Phan et al., 2023). This perception aligns with Goodson's (2003) concept of the "*crisis of positionality*", where externally imposed reforms are experienced as burdensome rather than empowering.

The leader of GEP 2018, Nguyen Minh Thuyet, noticed that many teachers were unaware that the new curriculum gave them more autonomy in how they taught. He said, "*The policy has liberated teachers, but they still believe they are bound*" (Nguyen, M.T., 2024, p. 15). This difference between policy and practice shows how hard it is to get teachers to understand the benefits of changing the curriculum. It highlights how much more direction and support is needed. The results show that for GEP 2018 to be successfully implemented, it needs strong professional support and clear communication of the curriculum goals. Only 30% of teachers said they received enough training, highlighting the need for more focused professional development programs that align with the goals of the new curriculum. Teachers expressed a strong desire for collaborative networks and professional learning groups to share best practices and ease the stress of working independently (Flores, 2004; Phan et al., 2023).

4.4 Teacher-Created Curricula: Autonomy or Added Burden?
According to Circular No. 28/2020/TT-BGDĐT issued by the MOET (2020), primary school teachers are tasked with "*actively implementing and taking responsibility for their educational plans; independently and responsibly carrying out their professional duties and ensuring the educational quality and effectiveness for each student under their charge*" (p. 5). However, the term "taking responsibility for the educational plan" has been interpreted differently by teachers. For some, it implies that they must independently develop and execute the educational plan for their classes. For others, it has a narrower interpretation, suggesting that teachers only need to adopt an existing plan from another source, ensuring that the content aligns with the curriculum.

> F: "*As we prepared to work with the GEP 2018, I took part in online introductory courses alongside other primary teachers nationwide, but I found them to be quite limited in their effectiveness. Consequently, when we began implementing the curriculum, teachers spent considerable time breaking down the goals into smaller components. This process resulted in noticeable variations in objectives across different schools, with each teacher's discretion playing a significant role. While school*

administrations occasionally supervised this process, the final outcomes were still largely shaped by individual interpretations of the curriculum. I didn't observe clear explanations during the training sessions about this particular aspect, which made me question whether there was a disconnect in how the new curriculum was introduced."

G: *"I felt the same way — the courses were too general, and when teachers implemented the curriculum, each had a different interpretation."*

H: *"I attended a course provided by the publisher of our textbook, even though it was during my free time. There was also a half-day introductory session for all the teachers in our area, where the chief editor of the GEP 2018 discussed the new school reform. That was the extent of our training!"*

I: *"So, my understanding of the GEP 2018 has been pieced together from various sources."*

K: *"Indeed, it's incredibly challenging to create tailored plans for each subject. Additionally, establishing an assessment system and setting criteria for different achievement levels — low, medium, and high — as required by Circular 27 from the MOET is entirely new for teachers. The textbooks offer minimal support for this, making it an enormous task!"*

D: *"My concern is that goal-setting and assessments could overshadow everything else, becoming the primary focus."*
(F, G, H, I, K, D, personal communication, December 16, 2023)

The teachers expressed considerable concern at the beginning stages of the implementation process, particularly about the significant workload associated with creating curricula for their classrooms. They pointed out the lack of foundational knowledge regarding the new curriculum and the absence of clear guidance to navigate the changes. According to Fullan (2007), without a mutual understanding of "*the principles and rationale behind the change*" (p. 34) among all involved, only surface-level changes will occur. Fullan (2007) emphasized that the third aspect of his theory, "*the potential shift in beliefs*" (p. 30), is especially challenging, as it delves into the core pedagogical values of individual teachers, which are crucial for the success of any reform. Despite these challenges, the teachers seemed determined to undertake this task.

By emphasizing the importance of designing individual plans as a central element of the implementation process, policymakers aim to convey their trust in teachers through the emphasis on designing individual plans. They aim to inspire professional development by allowing teachers' creativity, individuality, and autonomy to flourish. Goodson (2003) highlights the need to balance external and internal forces of change in this process. This balance involves responding to externally mandated demands, such as interpreting the learning outcomes in the curriculum, while also providing space for pedagogical action, including selecting appropriate subject content and methodology for local curricula.

In a different focus group, teachers expressed concerns that the concept of teacher-created curricula might lead to significant inconsistencies across schools nationwide. E stated:

> "*What I find challenging is that the competence aims are not clearly defined, and I am not in favor of the demanding task of translating these aims into specific learning objectives. This process could lead to major differences between schools, as our interpretations may vary significantly from those of other teachers.*"
>
> (E, personal communication, December 26, 2023)

E pointed out the uncertainty surrounding the new curriculum and raised concerns about teachers' ability to provide a reliable and precise interpretation of learning outcomes. Despite these concerns, teachers acknowledged the importance of converting these outcomes into practical and effective learning objectives. However, this process is challenging, as teachers, while recognizing their role as curriculum developers, also seek pragmatic solutions to manage their workload efficiently. Our data showed noticeable differences in perspectives across the focus groups. Unlike the concerns mentioned earlier, another teacher, G, viewed the local curriculum as a helpful tool for organizing her work:

> "*At my school, we engage in a lot of theme-based and cross-curricular teaching. For instance, we've spread themes across grades 1–4 in our plan, allowing us to work toward multiple competence aims at the same time. What I genuinely appreciate about the GEP 2018 is its clarity in stating what we need to prioritize. Each week, we establish clear learning objectives for the students; this approach is different from before. I really value how specific the competence aims are.*"
>
> (G, personal communication, December 28, 2023)

This teacher has embraced the autonomy offered by the new curriculum to some extent and has formulated a clear plan of action. Sau considered the local curriculum supportive of her instructional approach, especially with its alignment with her cross-curricular methodology and the flexibility it provides for long-term planning. This mirrors the policymakers' intention to enhance internal change forces, particularly by reinforcing the teacher's role in the process. G's approach demonstrated how a teacher can become a key player in curriculum reform by recognizing the link between policymakers' objectives, the curriculum, and her own teaching philosophy. This alignment enables her to experience what Goodson (2003) refers to as "*personal professionalism*" (p. 74). Goodson further argues that sustainable change requires an environment that acknowledges the complexity of teachers' work and the personal dimension of the teaching profession. Curriculum reform is inherently personal, as it involves the teacher's commitment and growth as a change agent. In this context, there is clear evidence that teachers' autonomy is being revitalized, which is a fundamental aspect of the policy underlying the new curriculum.

> H: "*The emphasis now is on what students are expected to learn, whereas previously, the focus was more on teaching methods. We now define clear*

learning objectives for each lesson and discuss them with our students, breaking down the competence goals into smaller, practical units. It's about making sure all the elements fit together. Then, students are involved in assessing their own learning before we evaluate their work."

D: *"While this is certainly a positive development, there is a concern that we might concentrate too much on setting goals for students. The learning process itself must remain at the center. And will there still be time for the enjoyable aspects of teaching and learning? I do recognize the advantages of goal-oriented teaching, but it's important to maintain a balance between learning objectives, activities, and assessment."*

(H, D, personal communication, December 12, 2023)

The teachers' reflections revealed a growing sense of ownership of the new curriculum as they recognized substantial changes in their teaching practices. A acknowledged the importance of these developments, viewing her newfound understanding as a key component in implementing the new curriculum effectively. Personal growth and beliefs play a significant role in the process, contributing to enhanced educational agency (Goodson, 2003), which aligns with the intentions of the policymakers behind the GEP 2018. The changes that the teachers themselves see are very important for helping students learn and grow even more. D said that the new curriculum has helped him see how people learn in a more complete way, considering objectives, methods, material, and assessment. He stressed how important it is to keep a well-rounded approach to all these different parts.

Another teacher shared their thoughts on the implementation process:

"I am eagerly awaiting the moment when we can confidently say that this new school reform has been fully established though I understand that it will take time. Only then can we begin to realistically assess what we can truly achieve."

(A, personal communication, November 25, 2023)

A's perspective revealed an awareness that rolling out the new curriculum is both a gradual and demanding process. However, this process is essential for aligning the classroom realities with the curriculum's intended objectives. This understanding marks a crucial step toward balancing the external and internal forces of change, combining intellectual effort with personal growth.

Our findings also highlighted a strong reliance on textbooks as key support for teachers during the development of local curricula. Historically, textbooks have played a crucial role in Vietnamese schools, with many teachers considering them to be authoritative and immutable. Across all focus groups, participants consistently mentioned their dependence on textbooks for guidance:

A: *"We were very concerned about the GEP 2018, so we sought a textbook that would clearly lay out pedagogical intentions, thematic links between lessons, objectives, and specific methods for implementing the Vietnamese*

subject curriculum – a firm foundation, so to speak. It was made clear by the publisher and authors that they adhered closely to the GEP 2018. However, it seems that the pedagogical intentions haven't been fully understood by teachers."

C: *"However, it's important to recognize that each chapter begins with clearly defined learning objectives, content, and the following steps. This structure greatly simplifies the process of preparing teaching plans for our lessons. A, it might be more beneficial to focus on the thematic connections rather than relying solely on the explicit wording in the textbook."*

E: *"The textbook we're using was developed to align with the Vietnamese subject curriculum in the GEP 2018. By reviewing all the chapters, you can assess how thoroughly you've covered the objectives – whether you have covered 50%, 70%, or even 100% of the objectives."*

H: *"I agree. The textbook is particularly supportive, especially in how it aligns with the GEP 2018."*

E: *"So, we've built our curriculum using this textbook as the foundation."*
(A, C, E, H, personal communication, November 29, 2023)

With the introduction of a new curriculum and the expanded responsibility of being curriculum developers, teachers instinctively turn to available resources to assist in adapting the curriculum to their specific needs. The data from our research indicated that teachers rely on the textbook as their main resource. The textbook helps them organize content, ensures alignment with the curriculum's learning outcomes, and includes clear references to the curriculum itself. The discussions highlighted above make it clear that the practical nature of the textbook plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' confidence in meeting the curriculum's requirements. This observation aligns with Fullan's theory on the first dimension of change, which emphasizes "*the possible use of new or revised materials*" (Fullan, 2007, p. 30), where teaching resources are seen as the most concrete aspect of change.

In earlier studies, it was observed that teachers placed "*complete trust in the authors' and publishers' claims that their textbook adheres to the curriculum*" (Nguyen, T. C. 2024, p. 124). Phan et al. (2023) also found that the textbook serves as the primary tool for teachers when creating local curricula. Additionally, their research revealed that with the introduction of the new curriculum, one in five teachers reported a heightened reliance on the textbook. The discussions underscored a dual dependency: teachers not only rely on the textbook to interpret the curriculum but also use it as a model for crafting their teaching programs. At the same time, there was a strong belief among teachers that the new textbook accurately mirrors the curriculum. This indicates that the textbook is a central resource in the process, acting as the primary tool for teachers to navigate externally imposed changes. However, as Fullan points out, while new materials are essential for reform, they must be part of a broader, more integrated change strategy.

An essential element of the discussion was the collaborative framework that has emerged during the implementation process. With increased local autonomy, teachers have relied on established cooperative networks to gather support. The interviews revealed a strong community spirit among participants, who frequently used "we" when describing their experiences. This collective approach aligns with Fullan's concept of "reculturing", where teachers start to internalize the beliefs and ideas that drive change (Fullan, 2007, p. 31). For instance, one focus group remarked, "*We are well-aligned in our understanding of effective language instruction, having collaborated for years to refine our teaching methods.*" This collective approach emphasizes that understanding the new curriculum is not an isolated task but a shared responsibility.

It is important to note that the teachers did not emphasize the significance of their leaders' support. As Romlan and Danim (2024) found, this observation fits with the idea that teachers were given a lot of responsibility while principals were supposed to be involved in the process of implementation. In our study, teachers said that their coworkers were the main people who helped them when the curriculum changed. Working together gave them confidence and strengthened their professional identity. This working group structure has become an important mechanism for aligning external directives with internal collaboration, effectively combining external and internal forces for change.

5. Conclusion

This study illustrates the challenges of implementing the GEP 2018 reform in Vietnam, where increased teacher autonomy is often perceived as a burden rather than an opportunity. While the findings provide valuable insights into the experiences of the selected participants, it is important to note that the results cannot be generalized to the broader population due to the use of a non-probability sampling method. The findings indicate that most teachers struggle with limited time, excessive assessment requirements, and insufficient support—all of which hinder the intended benefits of autonomy. Although the GEP 2018 reform aims to engage teachers more actively in curriculum planning, only a small percentage of teachers feel genuinely empowered. For most, the changes have added pressure rather than providing meaningful autonomy.

The gap between policy goals and classroom realities underscores the need for targeted professional development, clearer guidance, and improved communication to bridge this divide. Such support is essential for ensuring that curriculum reforms are both practical and beneficial to teachers' roles. Additionally, this study explores teachers' responses to the complex balance that policymakers must strike between external demands and internal classroom dynamics when implementing a new curriculum. The findings suggest that teachers have not fully internalized the intended autonomy communicated by school administrators. While policymakers have extended autonomy and trust to educators, many teachers remain uncertain about their capacity to effectively manage this newfound freedom, even as they strive to meet these new expectations.

6. Acknowledgments

7. References

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Guide

Goal: The conversations with focus groups were meant to get detailed information from primary school teachers about their experiences, thoughts, and problems with putting the GEP 2018 into place in Vietnam. The interviews were meant to find out what teachers thought about their own freedom, how they ran their classrooms, and the general effects of changing the curriculum, especially in the Vietnamese language subject.

Structure of the Interview Guide: The interview guide is made up of semi-structured questions that are organized into different parts to help the conversation flow. This method gives you the freedom to dig deeper into the answers while still making sure that the main points are always covered.

Interview Sections and Questions:

Section	Questions
Introduction Questions	1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your teaching background?
	2. How long have you been teaching under the GEP 2018 curriculum?
	3. What are your initial impressions of the increased autonomy provided by GEP 2018?
Perceptions of Autonomy	1. How do you perceive the autonomy granted to you under the GEP 2018 curriculum?
	2. Do you feel that you have more freedom in designing your lesson plans and teaching methods? Why or why not?
	3. In what ways do you feel empowered or restricted by the new curriculum?
Challenges in Curriculum Implementation	1. What are the main challenges you have encountered while implementing the GEP 2018?
	2. How do the new assessment requirements impact your teaching and workload?
	3. Can you describe any difficulties you face in meeting the curriculum's competence goals within the allocated instructional time?
	4. How has the emphasis on student competencies affected your traditional teaching methods?
Support and Resources	1. What kind of support or resources have you received from educational authorities, your school, or peers to help you adapt to the GEP 2018?
	2. Do you feel that the training provided was sufficient to prepare you for the changes in the curriculum?
	3. What additional support do you think would be beneficial in helping you navigate the new curriculum?
Emotional and Professional Impact	1. How has the implementation of GEP 2018 affected your professional identity and job satisfaction?
	2. Do you feel that the increased responsibilities have influenced your well-being or stress levels?

	3. In what ways, if any, do you feel that the reform has helped you grow professionally?
Suggestions for Improvement	1. Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to policymakers regarding the GEP 2018?
	2. What changes or additional support would help you better manage the autonomy and responsibilities under the new curriculum?
Closing Questions	1. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the GEP 2018?
	2. Are there any aspects of the curriculum reform that you believe are particularly beneficial or detrimental?

Notes: The interviews were done in Vietnamese so that the people who took part would feel at ease and be able to freely say what they thought. The moderator led the discussions without getting in the way too much, which let the conversation flow naturally and allow people to connect with each other in new ways. The responses were typed up, made anonymous, and then thematically analyzed to find important themes and patterns that related to the study questions.

Appendix B: Interview Transcript Sample

As an introduction, this example transcript shows a part of an interview with primary school teachers in central Vietnam who have experience putting the GEP 2018 into practice. The conversation took place in Vietnamese and was then translated into English so that it could be analyzed. The participants were asked to share their thoughts on autonomy, problems, and their experiences with changing the program.

Participants:

Moderator (M)

Teacher 1 (T1): A, 8 years of teaching experience

Teacher 2 (T2): C, 10 years of teaching experience

Teacher 3 (T3): D, 7 years of teaching experience

Teacher 4 (T3): E, 9 years of teaching experience

Transcript Excerpt:

M: Thanks to everyone who came to today's talk. Let's start with your first thoughts on how the GEP 2018 program gives you more freedom. How do you feel about the freedom that the GEP 2018 program gives you?

T1: To be honest, having more freedom is both good and bad. In some ways, it gives us more freedom in how we teach, but in others, it feels like we're being left to handle everything ourselves. It's hard to know how to use this autonomy effectively because there isn't a clear direction.

M: Do you feel that you have more freedom in designing your lesson plans and teaching methods? Why or why not?

T2: Yes, we do have more freedom, but it's challenging to make practical use of it. The curriculum expects us to develop creative teaching plans and assessments, but without clear direction, it becomes difficult, especially with 45 students of varying abilities in a 35-minute lesson. I often feel like I'm juggling too many things.

M: What are the main challenges you have encountered while implementing the GEP 2018?

T3: Time management is a huge issue. There are so many assessment requirements and competencies to cover within a limited timeframe. I spend more time preparing assessments and paperwork than engaging with the students. It's draining, and it feels like I'm constantly behind.

M: Can you describe any difficulties you face in meeting the curriculum's competence goals within the allocated instructional time?

T1: Meeting the competence goals in just 35 minutes per lesson is nearly impossible. The students need more time to adjust, especially in the early grades. We try to fit everything in, but it feels rushed and ineffective.

M: What kind of support or resources have you received from educational authorities, your school, or peers to help you adapt to the GEP 2018?

T2: The support has been minimal. We've had some basic training sessions, but they don't address the specific challenges we face daily. Most of what I've learned has come from discussions with my colleagues, who are also trying to make sense of it all.

M: Do you feel that the training provided was sufficient to prepare you for the changes in the curriculum?

T3: Not really. The training was too general, and it lacked practical examples that we could apply directly in our classrooms. We need more targeted support that addresses real classroom scenarios.

M: Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to policymakers regarding the GEP 2018?

T1: We need more detailed and practical training sessions that show us exactly how to implement the curriculum changes. It's not enough to know what to do; we need to see how to do it effectively.

T2: Additional time for planning and collaboration would also be very helpful. Right now, everything is rushed, and there's little opportunity to share insights or reflect on what works.

T3: More professional learning communities would be beneficial. Knowing that others are experiencing the same challenges and being able to share strategies could help us feel more supported.

Notes: The transcript was anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality. Condensation techniques were used to summarize and clarify key points, maintaining the integrity of participants' expressions.

Appendix C: Survey Questions and Responses on Teacher Experiences with GEP 2018 Implementation

Question	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Q1: How do you perceive the autonomy granted to you under the GEP 2018 curriculum?	Positive	6	30%
	Negative	10	50%
	Neutral	4	20%
Q2: Do you feel that you have more freedom in designing your lesson plans and teaching methods? Why, or why not?	Yes	8	40%
	No	9	45%
	Unsure	3	15%
Q3: What are the main challenges you have encountered while implementing the GEP 2018?	Time Management	13	65%
	Assessment Requirements	4	20%
	Lack of Support	3	15%
Q4: How do the new assessment requirements impact your teaching and workload?	Increased Workload	12	60%
	No Significant Impact	5	25%
	Uncertain	3	15%
Q5: Can you describe the level of difficulty you face in meeting the curriculum's competence goals within the allocated instructional time?	Very Difficult	13	65%
	Somewhat Difficult	4	20%
	Not Difficult	3	15%
Q6: What kind of support or resources have you received from educational authorities, your school, or peers to help you adapt to the GEP 2018?	Sufficient Support	6	30%
	Insufficient Support	10	50%
	No Support	4	20%
Q7: Do you feel that the training provided was sufficient to prepare you for the changes in the curriculum?	Sufficient	6	30%
	Insufficient	11	55%
	No Opinion	3	15%
Q8: How has the implementation of GEP 2018 affected your professional identity and job satisfaction?	Positive Impact	5	25%
	Negative Impact	12	60%
	Neutral Impact	3	15%
Q9: Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to policymakers regarding the GEP 2018?	More Training	9	45%
	Clearer Guidelines	7	35%
	Increased Support	4	20%