

## **The Curriculum in Praxis:**

### **How Purpose of School Is Actualized in Vietnam, Mexico, and the United States**

#### **Introduction**

What is the purpose of school, and what role does culture play in how that purpose is actualized? How this question is approached reflects how society thinks about what knowledge is of most worth, which ultimately reflects cultural, philosophical, and political ideas about life purpose (Huebner, 1975/1999; Kincheloe, 2008). This study explores how curriculum influences the way people create life purpose in Vietnam, Mexico, and the U.S. The theoretical framework is narrativity; the data analysis framework is narrative inquiry. The findings point to how curriculum reflects cultural and political beliefs about life purpose, and how each country uses its education system as an instrument to further evolving truths. These findings allow educators to think about curriculum and the purpose of school with an epistemological lens that illuminates how educational experiences and the contextual factors in which they occur influence a person's beliefs about life purpose. For the parameters of this study, we define *life purpose* as the impetus for individual decision-making processes.

We begin this chapter by delineating fundamental features of each country's education system followed by a review of the pertinent literature. We then outline the methodology for this study before representing the findings. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of what the findings contribute to fundamental questions about the purpose of school and what knowledge is of most worth.

#### **The Education Systems of the U.S., Mexico, and Vietnam**

In this section, we will provide an overview of basic characteristics of the education systems of each country. Table 1 below compares the three systems.

Table 1

*Comparison of the Education System in VN, MX, & US*

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>United Stated</b>
Compulsory schooling	Primary & middle school only	x	x
Free public schooling	-	x	x
School choice (private, charter, etc.)	Dependent on financial means	x	x
High-stakes testing	x	-	x
College-oriented	x	-	x
National curriculum	x	x	-

**The Education System of the United States of America**

Education in the U.S. is compulsory for kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Elementary school starts with kindergarten at the age of five and continues through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Students then move on to middle school, which typically comprises grades 6 – 8. High school consists of 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade (U.S. Network for Education Information, 2008). Students take standardized tests starting in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Since the curriculum is designed by each state, the tests are based on state-mandated requirements, and promotion and retention measures differ among the states.

Generally, a failing student must attend remedial courses. Failure in grades 5 and 8 usually results in automatic retention. A high school diploma is obtained with passing scores for the five End Of Course Exams that are administered in biology, algebra, history, and twice in English (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). From elementary through high school, children are oriented toward college.

**The Education System of Mexico**

Education in Mexico is compulsory from preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Amanti, 2013). Primary education comprises grades 1-6. Students then enter lower secondary for grades 7-9. Upper secondary consists of grades 10 – 12 although a few states identify grade 11 as completion of upper secondary (Magaziner & Monroy, 2016). Compulsory education laws require students

to remain in school until all grade levels are completed (Amanti, 2013). However, Puryear, Santibañez, and Solano (2012) reported that almost half of all students at the secondary level drop out and do not graduate. Students from low socioeconomic families have a higher drop out rate than children of higher socioeconomic status (Amanti, 2013; Puryear et al., 2012). The high school curriculum includes mathematics, natural and social sciences, and language and communication with courses usually including “biology, chemistry, physics, a foreign language, arts, and technology” (Magaziner & Monroy, 2016, n. p.).

### **The Education System of Vietnam**

Vietnamese children attend elementary school for grades 1 – 5 and middle school for grades 6 – 9. The new Education Law, passed in 2006, states that “learning is the right and obligation of every citizen” and that families have the responsibility to help members between the ages of 6 – 14 to obtain “universalized education” (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2010/2011, n.p.). Although attendance is officially compulsory, no repercussions are in place for parents who do not send their children to school. Article 10 of same law requires the State to ensure social equity in education; however, particularly in poor rural areas, children forsake regular education to help provide food for their families. Officially, attendance for grades 1 – 9 is free, but the government permits the collection of tuition fees (World Bank Group, 2016), which change monthly.

Primary education enables children to basic literacy in writing, reading, mathematics, physical and moral education, art, and science as it pertains to personal health and hygiene (Hàng, Meijer, Bulte, & Pilot 2015). In middle school, history and geography are added. At the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, students take a comprehensive exam whose results determine whether they can continue on to high school. The test results also determine if students can attend the high school

of their first or second choice or whether they have to go to the neighborhood school, which limits their chances of education beyond 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

High school streams students into three tracks: basic, natural sciences, and social sciences (World Bank Group, 2016). For three years, students prepare intensely for a high-stakes comprehensive exam, which they must pass to obtain their high school diploma. The scores simultaneously determine whether they can move on to higher education, which requires an almost perfect score.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Curriculum Theory as a Concept for Understanding Purpose of School in the United States**

The U.S. education system is driven by its official political goal, which is to prepare students for global competitiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For the past three decades, schools have implemented a one-size-fits-all curriculum to get every high school graduate ready for college. While this might be an arduous and worthy goal, it is not working because only 75% of all high school students graduate and yet fewer enroll in college (Barton & Coley, 2011).

Further, a society's needs go beyond getting high school students ready for college or career. It takes other skills to do well in life and additional skills to seek a profession, get employed, and hold a job. Ravitch (2016) voiced her fears regarding a minimalist curriculum, which trains, not educates, a generation of children who lack the cognitive and social skills to think for themselves and to make decisions. As long as a nation's primary goal for education is to outdo other countries on international tests, such as the PISA<sup>1</sup>, or in the global economy, this

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<sup>1</sup> Program for International Student Assessment: The PISA tests the reading, mathematics and science skills of 15 year-olds from 65 to 70 countries every three years. In the 2012 PISA, the United States ranked in 36<sup>th</sup> place (OECD, 2013). In the previous test, the U.S. ranked in 17<sup>th</sup> place (OECD, 2010), which is the place Viet Nam occupies at present while Mexico is in 53<sup>rd</sup> place (OECD, 2010).

goal cannot be achieved because this is a short-cut approach that belies the fact that education is a process and not a result. Educating a nation means to educate individual people in ways that enable them to share their constructed knowledge for the good of their communities, small and large (Kincheloe, 2008). In order for that to be possible, the reward and punishment system that has become the foundation of evaluation must be changed to one that allows teachers, schools, and districts to use evaluation methods honestly in order to analyze strengths and needs.

### **Curriculum Theory as a Concept for Understanding Purpose of School in Mexico**

The Mexican education system is regulated by both the federal government, through the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), and by the individual states (Magaziner & Monroy, 2016). It has been the object of several reforms within the last two decades such as teacher education and professional development, curricular reforms, and increased compulsory schooling.

Further, the government has revised teacher evaluations to include promotions based on increased student achievement (Levinson, 2014). Levinson (2014) indicated, “It is no coincidence that the proposed Mexican assessment regime bears a striking resemblance to the high-stakes testing inaugurated by No Child Left Behind in the United States. These are truly global trends” (51). The idea of raising student achievement is an important goal, but contextual factors, such as socio-economic status, play a role in school achievement as pupils from high socio economic status tend to have much higher levels of academic success than their less wealthy counterparts, particularly indigenous students or those in rural locations (Amanti, 2013; Puryear et al., 2012).

With regard to content, above mentioned SEP controls textbooks and the curriculum (Amanti, 2013; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Mexico employs a national curriculum

that all schools must follow. Textbooks used at the primary level are published and distributed by the government. Secondary schools receive a list of approved textbooks from which they must select. Regardless of the control over the curriculum and required textbooks, scores have lagged on international exams, such as the PISA, with Mexico ranking in the bottom third of all countries (Levinson, 2014; Puryear, Santibañez, & Solano, 2012).

### **Curriculum Theory as a Concept for Understanding Purpose of School in Vietnam**

The official goal of the Vietnamese education system is to develop “human resources for the industrialization and modernization of the country” (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2010/2011, p. 10). The purpose of education is to form the socialist Vietnamese personality (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2010/2011). Vietnam has a national curriculum, which was fundamentally restructured between 1997 and 2007 with focus on the renovation of teaching methodology, new textbooks, and English language learning.

While the new curriculum is designed to enable citizens to help their country progress, there is a fundamental discrepancy between theory and praxis. Most notably, the inequality of access to English language learning in rural areas widens the social and financial gap between urban and rural populations. Rural teachers are alone in their efforts, marginalized, and poorly trained. They do not have support from colleagues, administrators, parents, or the community because English is not used or even remotely present in the communities’ lives (Chinh, Linh, Quynh, & Ha, 2014). Parents cannot help children with homework and have more pressing needs than supporting their children’s English language learning. In urban areas, on the other hand, children encounter English in daily life, e.g. in the form of billboards and TV commercials while students in rural areas lack the social capital to even understand concepts like “museum”

and “standing in line” (Chin et al., 2014). Rural students are often considered less intelligent when, in fact, they have as much potential as their urban peers but lack their opportunities. As a result, by the time they meet their urban counterparts in middle or high school, they are already behind and feel inferior. The notion to make English mandatory in the third grade is an arduous and important goal, but it is executed in ways that further social injustice.

Despite basic cultural differences between Vietnam and the U.S., it appears that the Vietnamese education system looks toward the U.S. as a model. For example, the National Institute for Education Management in Vietnam (NIEM) (National Institute for Education Management, 2016) organized a conference in Hanoi to explore how the U.S. evaluates teacher effectiveness, which is based on students’ test scores. And yet, research has shown that connecting students’ test scores to teacher evaluation improves neither learning nor teaching (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; Ravitch, 2016).

The way in which a society educates its young reflects what knowledge it considers to be of most worth. It shapes the beliefs and values the curriculum fosters, which influence an individual’s self-understanding and, eventually, how a person places her/himself in the communities of which s/he is a part. The undeniable influence of the United States points to the importance of economic power over other values, which bears the danger of clashing with culture and traditions in non-Western countries. Curriculum is about the essence of knowledge and therefore primarily an epistemological and metaphysical endeavor (Ladson-Billings, 2016). It is not useful to approach curricular questions from the macro level of globalization nor from the micro level that reduces curriculum theory to practical know-how questions and people to human resources. In order to change education in ways that further a person’s, and thereby a

society's, becoming, all approaches have to meet at some meso level that resembles the balance between globalization and cultural context.

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed to gather, analyze, and represent data was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that people make meaning of experiences by thinking of them as stories. This study was conducted with six participants over a period of four months. Data was collected through structured and conversational interviews and memoirs. Data was collected in English, which all participants spoke fluently. The research sites for this project varied. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Skype within the country of residence, which for both researchers and participants was the U.S.A. Part of the data collection and analysis processes were numerous member checks to assure trustworthiness and academic rigor (Glesne, 2011). This research project was approved by the Internal Review Board to which the researchers report in order to ensure that all ethical requirements for social research were followed.

### **Participant Selection**

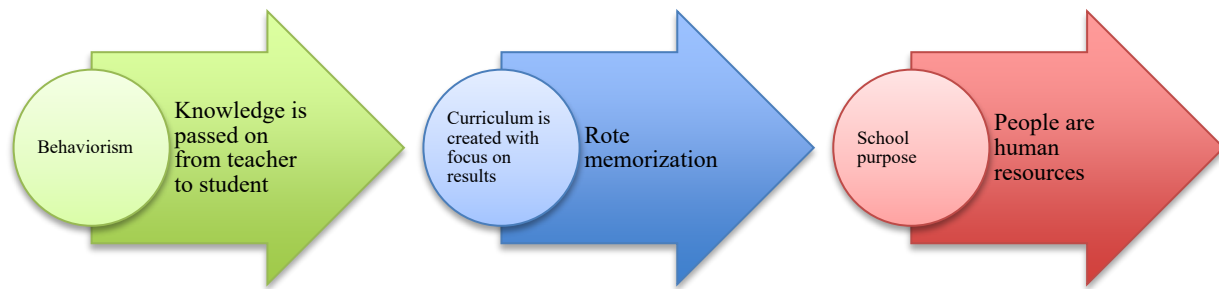
In an attempt to explore how educational experiences influence a person's life purpose, we started our data collection with two participants in their late 60s. At this age, a person has lived a great part of his life and therefore has the unique ability to reflect on his life's choices retrospectively, which is an important aspect of exploring life purpose. Thomas and Julio<sup>2</sup> went to school in the United States during the 1960s at which time the U.S. education system was

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas and Julio are self-chosen pseudonyms.



similar to present-day education in Mexico and Vietnam as shown in Figure 1 below.



*Figure 1* Basic Characteristics of the Education Systems of the U.S., Mexico, and Vietnam at the Time Pertinent to the Six Participants

Julio and Thomas' kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade experiences were characterized by social and academic challenges, respectively. Thomas grew up as a White male in a middle class family, which means that education was a priority and a college degree always the goal. As a result, his dyslexia and dyscalculia, which were undiagnosed in the 1950s, had a major influence on his early educational experiences. By contrast, Julio, who is academically gifted, grew up as a Hispanic in a Mexican-American border town as the son of an auto parts sales clerk and a housewife. According to tradition, he was expected to end education with a high school diploma and get a job. Education for social mobility was not considered. Today Julio is a biologist and currently teaches at a private university in Texas. Thomas is an internationally renowned visual artist and teaches at a university in the Northern U.S.

Our Mexican participants included a female in her late 30s and another who just celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. At this time in life, purpose tends to be actively actualized rather than retrospectively reflected upon. Zoraida<sup>3</sup> completed grade 12 and two years of college whereas Maria completed the required compulsory education, which at that time, ended with 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zoraida chose to use her given name, while Maria is a pseudonym.

grade. Zoraida's and Maria's parents encouraged and supported their education even though their families struggled financially. Both grew up in Mexico but currently live and are employed in the U.S.

Finally, in order to understand something about the processes by which the lived curriculum influences how a person elects purpose for him/herself, we invited two Vietnamese students in their early 20s to participate in this study. Lý and Heidi<sup>4</sup> moved from Vietnam to the U.S. two and five years ago, respectively, and are currently taking classes for their bachelor's degree at different Texas universities. Heidi's father comes from a family who was too poor to support an education and dropped out in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Her mother finished school, which, in the 1980s, ended with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Both parents made education for their children a priority. Similarly, Lý's mom dropped out after 6<sup>th</sup> grade while her father completed school. Lý was raised with the notion that education is a means for upward social mobility. For example, her mother taught her how to write before Lý started school.

Glesne (2011) referred to this form of participant selection as purposeful selection. Patton (2002) explained that purposeful sampling allows the researcher to study a phenomenon in depth because s/he can "learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of research" (Patton, 2002: 230). Of central importance to the purpose of this study is how people's educational experiences influence the way they create purpose for themselves. The different generations of participants offer diverse angles from which to illuminate this process, which helps to explore it in depth.

### **Data Collection, Analysis, and Representation**

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<sup>4</sup> Heidi is a self-chosen pseudonym. Lý chose to use her given name.

Primary data was collected in the form of conversational, semi-structured, structured, and member-check interviews; as well as written pieces such as memoirs, electronic mail, and text messages. Secondary data consisted of the researchers' reflections, analytic memos, and peer reviews.

The data analysis framework for this study is paradigmatic cognition, which uses stories as data that are analyzed through an inductive process. Polkinghorne (1995) stated that this approach to narrative analysis brings order to experiences by understanding how they are similar and form patterns (Polkinghorne, 1995). We represent the data in form of analytical narratives that contain in-vivo quotes<sup>5</sup>. The findings were member-checked to assure accuracy, trustworthiness, and academic rigor.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited by the number and choice of participants. While the six participants completed public school education, all three countries have a noteworthy number of children who drop out of school and whose approach to life purpose remains unexplored in this study. Another limitation consists in the researchers' subjectivity, which is grounded in our own experiences and beliefs and consequently influences how we make meaning of and represent the co-constructed truths that are the findings of this study. Hence, these findings cannot immediately be transferred to people other than those whose truths they represent. It will take the reader's interpretations to make them transferable. This means the findings of any study are rather individual truths whose purpose is to serve as a source of criticism and imagination (Huebner, 1979/1999). Individual analysis is needed to better understand how educational experiences and contextual factors influence a person's beliefs and life purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> "In vivo" derives from the root for "live" and refers to words and phrases from the actual language of the participants in qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009).

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how the lived curriculum influences an individual's life purpose. In order to answer these questions, we analyzed the data with focus on what kinds of relationships curriculum encounters nurture. People exist in three relationships simultaneously – with self, other, and world (Huebner, 1975). The tables below summarize our findings regarding the nature of those relationships by country. In the classroom, *World* consists of the relationship between student and teacher and student and content; *Other* consists of student with student relationships; *Self* is how curriculum encounters are experienced and interpreted.

Table 2

#### *The Role of U.S. American Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose*

Relationship	Curriculum Encounters	Nature of the Relationship	Influence on How Life Purpose Is Created
World	Student - Teacher	Trust in authority	The world is there to help me.
	Student - Content	Need for immediate relevance	How can I fit in based on my talents & interests?
Other	Student - Student	Competitive ethics Role of social status	What is my place in my social relations?
Self	With Self	Trust in the system: hard work pays off Not standing out in socially detrimental ways	What matters to me, and how can I engage in those matters?

Table 3

#### *The Role of Mexican Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose*

Relationship	Curriculum Encounters	Nature of the Relationship	Influence on How Life Purpose Is Created
World	Student - Teacher	Respect for authority Parenting-like	The teacher will help me. I am helped if I am obedient.
	Student - Content	Interested Trusting in the teacher-parent	I am liked if I do well.
Other	Student - Student	Family oriented	Family is priority.

		Socializing	Contribute to the family's survival.
Self	With Self	Responsible for helping family	How does what I do matter and contribute to my family?

Table 4

*The Role of Vietnamese Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose*

Relationship	Curriculum Encounters	Nature of the Relationship	Influence on How Life Purpose Is Created
World	Student - Teacher	Respect for age & wisdom	I am worthy if I am academically successful.
	Student - Content	Non-questioning	The teacher is wise.
Other	Student - Student	Helping each other Blending in rather than standing out	How can I help my communities (extended family, friends)?
Self	With Self	Fortitude – life is hard and you cannot give up High work ethics Return the sacrifice	How can I matter, and what do I need to do?

**The Role of U.S. American Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose**

When Thomas was asked how he felt about school, his immediate reply was: “I can’t think of anything I liked about school.” He noted the best teachers were those who left him alone to figure things out, perhaps trusting in their guidance while he was finding his ways. Julio replied to the same question: “I loved school! I LOVED SCHOOL!” He reflected an inherent trust in his teachers when he explained: “They took it upon themselves that they knew what we had to know to be successful later on in life.” Based on Thomas’ and Julio’s narratives, it appears that students’ relationships with *World* are characterized by their trust in the authority figure Teacher, which leads to a purpose creation based on the premises that the world is there to help you. When we talked about content, Julio, academically gifted, remembered mischievously, “I did my assignments ...uh ... I didn't pay attention to a lot of teachers because I was ... I had the book from class, and I was reading my own science fiction books.” For Thomas, relevant

learning was mainly hands-on experiences. He remembered, “We built Indian villages and all kinds of other stuff, and TVs, and made bows and arrows, you know, and sort of tomahawks .... It was enjoyable to do these things, and it wasn’t a matter of analyzing.” In terms of students’ relation with content, there seems to be a need for relevance, the absence of which leads to reluctance. Julio and Thomas narrated their early educational experiences in a way where their meaning-making is focused on how they fit into their world in terms of interests and talents.

When asked about their relationships with other children, both Julio and Thomas experienced competitive ethics and the importance of one’s social status. For example, Thomas explained, “[N]o matter how much I studied or whatever, I never could get a hundred on a spelling test.... and so part of it was intimidation and, you know, a sense of feeling of being put on the spot.” Julio remembered,

I was kind of a loner. Except in elementary ... But when I got to high school, some of the athletes recognized that I was able to do stuff ... with words ... and so I would do homework for one of the big football players. And he would protect me from everybody else. I was a scrawny little kid, and so that was how we traded power. I had the power with words, and he had the power like being physical.

These insights suggest that in relationships with *Other* purpose is created by coming to terms with one’s place in social relations.

U.S. American curriculum encounters with *Self* reflect the general idea of the American dream: hard work pays off, which indicates a basic trust in the system. So Thomas suffered through school and college because getting a college degree was what his parents and teachers told him a successful person does even though he was not academically successful. He explained that it was his experiences in his first drawing class that made things fall into place for

him. Continuing his education paid off for him because his MFA degree allows him to teach art in higher education. He pointed out that the importance of this opportunity lies in the fact that he can enable those who are differently abled to find their ways.

Julio, on the other hand, despite being academically gifted, followed his father's request to earn money and took a job as a car parts sales clerk after graduating from high school. He later enrolled in a community college and joined the environmental club. He recalled the experience as follows: "It was like OH MY GOD! This is where I got to go! This is where I could do the stuff that I dreamed about! I said, 'The hell with the cars and that stuff.'" This turned out to be a life-changing epiphany for him as he continued his education to earn his PhD in biology. Thomas' and Julio's reflections indicate U.S. American curriculum encounters afford the individual to think about himself in terms of what matters to him and how he can engage in these matters.

### **The Role of Mexican Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose**

When asked to describe her teachers, Maria indicated, "They get mad only with the kids that don't pay attention or do their homework. If you do your homework, you're good." It appears that students were deserving of the teachers' attention through obedience. When asked what were typical things teachers would say to her or to other students, Zoraida recalled being told, "You are a good student. And you are strong in what you want to do." In answering that same question, Maria reflected that teachers encouraged students to "always be good. And they push us and encourage us to study" as well as "Be careful with who [you] talk ... stay away from bad people." When asked what experience she remembered the most, Maria explained, "When he says 'Maria is the only one that got a 100,' I'm like 'Yay!'" In this context, students seek their teachers' appreciation. Such encouragement and recognition reinforces students' sense of worth.

Classes often have 40 – 50 students, thus the acknowledgement of their individual achievement was a positive experience. Zoraida and Maria stated several times that they liked their teachers and school. Such comments support the caring relationship to which Zoraida and Maria allude. Students trust teachers to acknowledge their self worth when they master content, which appears to also influence students' interest in and enjoyment of school. Thus, it appears students' relationship with *World* with respect to Teacher is characterized by respect for authority and a parenting-like quality.

When asked what were typical things other students would say to her, Maria indicated she did not remember anything specific but discussed how she cried when she graduated as she realized she would not see her classmates on a regular basis. She shared that she continues to communicate with some of those friends. Both Zoraida and Maria recalled school as a place to socialize with friends. Zoraida emphasized the strong focus on family. Children live at home until they complete school and start working full time or get married. Thus, they tend to live at home while attending college. This dependence on and the strong tie to family is a common occurrence. Thus, the relationship of the student with the *Other* is characterized through socialization and a focus on the family.

When asked if there was anything that teachers would do to make her feel good about being in school, Maria noted, "They always tell us how to do the right thing and study. If we want to have a better job or something..." This indicates teachers emphasized how school assisted in their development. When asked to describe the schools, Zoraida indicated that attending school is also linked to family responsibility in that there is an expectation that children will help in taking care of the family. She gave the example of how it is common for children who graduate from college to assist their siblings, through financial and other means, to attend



and complete college. Maria added that her school set up a type of savings account that students could contribute to throughout the year. At the end of the year the students were given the money saved, which she indicated she used to “buy stuff for our house.” This provided another example of taking on family responsibility. Zoraida and Maria discussed how their parents stress the importance of attending school. Students’ relationship with *Self* involves attending school to better themselves so they can contribute to family. Thus, encounters with curriculum further an understanding of self as part of one’s immediate and extended family.

### **The Role of Vietnamese Curriculum Encounters in Creating Life Purpose**

When Heidi and Lý were asked about their early educational experiences, each replied that they enjoyed going to school up until high school. Lý explained,

Elementary – little children, they don’t know ... They’re like, ‘Oh we’re friends in school!’ And sometimes you just go to school for fun. And middle school, they know a little bit: ‘Oh, ok, there are teachers that are fun. So I think I’m gonna go for that.’ And in high school, [you] have to study for ... the most important exam in your life. And if you don’t pass, just go home. You can’t do anything.”

What Lý referred to as *knowing* pertains to the understanding that education is one of the only two ways out of poverty and insecurity. The other is one’s belonging to the communist party, which offers those who are privileged enough a chance of a life with relative financial stability. Throughout their narratives, Lý and Heidi reflected an acquiescence to the status quo amidst an unquestioning respect for authority for their elders. For example, Heidi recalled an incident where the teacher asked her to the blackboard though she knew that Heidi, who had been daydreaming, would be embarrassed. When she failed, the teacher told her that her brain was small. Heidi concluded this anecdote with the following explanation: “[They] try to hurt you so

you will feel bad and study. Study more to prove that you're not bad like they said." This anecdote is representative of many others recalled by both participants in that it shows a relationship between student and teacher that is not based on rapport but on unquestioning acceptance of the latter. The nature of students' relationship with *World* as presented in their relationships with Teacher is one of absolute acceptance. Students, on the other hand, feel accepted and validated if they pass "the most important exam" of their lives, which is the comprehensive high school/college entrance exam. Lý explained, "This is our culture: If you pass the exam, you're good. If not, you wasted your 12 years. And every year a lot of people, a lot of students that don't pass the exam, they try to kill themselves." The worst part of failing the exam is that children feel like a disappointment for their parents whose money and time they have wasted.

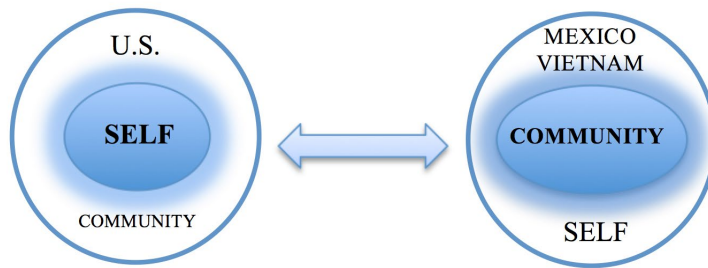
Regarding students' relationship with *Other*, both Heidi and Lý remembered how kids helped each other getting to school, which required maneuvering a scooter in the chaotically congested Vietnam traffic, and prepare for exams together. What stood out during our conversations was their focus on blending in. For example, with 40 – 50 students in a room, Heidi said people know your name "if you're special in class, special like you don't wanna study." Not wanting to study is shameful since it is a waste of parents' resources; hence, being "special" is undesirable.

Vietnamese children go to school and study knowing that their chances of getting a job are slim. Lý explained even if they get the perfect score on "the most important exam of your life," and if they get into a university and graduate, they need money to bribe officials to get a job unless they are part of the communist party. Membership is possible only if you are related or close to a government worker. She concluded, "I just don't understand ... we value our

school but when we study for it and get a degree, you don't always use it. ... Just if your family belongs to the government, then you can work." Heidi reflected on this by reiterating a piece of wisdom all Vietnamese children learn from their parents: Life is not a path strewn with flowers. She concluded that a person's most important characteristic is fortitude. Her reflection on life sums up well how curriculum encounters influence the way Vietnamese students create purpose: "[M]y life has taught me three important things: how much you loved, how gently you lived, and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you."

### **Discussion**

This study explored how curriculum influences the way people create life purpose in Vietnam, Mexico, and the United States. The findings indicate that in Vietnam, curriculum is used to transfer knowledge, and the purpose of school is the successful passing of "the most important exam," which validates parents' sacrifices and determines a student's worth. In Mexico, the kind of purpose furthered by the curriculum is to better yourself for the sake of the family. In the U.S., the purpose of school is to enable self-understanding and self-determination. The findings reflect a major difference between the two developing countries and the Western country: The point of origin in the U.S. seems to be the "I" who places him/herself in his/her communities. These communities are based on interest, which could be either natural strengths or the prospect of economic gains. By contrast, in Mexican and Vietnamese approaches to life purpose, the point of origin is the community one finds him/herself in, e.g. family or local social network. The individual thrives if the community thrives, for which reason the impetus derives from group needs while in the U.S. it is born out of individual needs.



*Figure 2* Point of Origin for Life Purpose Thinking

The findings indicate how a society approaches questions about purpose of school depends not solely on its culture but equally on its socio-economic context. In the two developing countries, despite fundamental cultural differences, culture orients life purpose toward the community. By contrast, the purpose of school in the United States seems to be primarily directed at the self whose evolution remains at the center of curricular thinking. It appears that socio-economic factors drive purpose more urgently than cultural ones.

While researching the education systems of Vietnam and Mexico, we encountered strong U.S. American influence on both. For example, the 2016 NIEM Conference in Hanoi mentioned above invited U.S. educational administrators from institutions of higher education to share their approaches to teacher accountability. Similarly, Mexico has begun to implement a high-stakes teacher evaluation system based on student test scores that mirrors that of the U.S. One must wonder whether structural influences bring with them ideological ones. As part of this study, we tried to understand something about the evolving truths for the three countries. We concluded that in U.S. schools an underlying idea is that power is valuable and desirable. In Mexico, the implicit curriculum teaches that relationships are the nucleus of existence; and in Vietnam, a fundamental lesson children learn is that they have to prove their worth. This gives rise to the question which human characteristics are nurtured by these truths. Under which circumstances

does the desire for power enhance narcissism? What might the influence of this ideology be on the fortitude that results from a person's curricular experiences in Vietnam, or on the social caring that characterizes those who experienced the Mexican education system?

The purpose of this paper is not to decide how each truth could best be capitalized on for the good of individuals, societies, or even the global picture. The purpose of this paper is to make overt some of the complexities that make up the phenomenon school so that educators in each country can make informed decisions about the purpose of school and how it can be actualized.

### **Conclusion**

The way in which a country's education system influences how life purpose is created and actualized derives from the complexities of its cultural and global contexts. This study was limited to three countries. Further research is needed to explore the influence of cultural and global contexts on non-Western education systems. While the body of research exploring Western and specifically the U.S. American education system and curriculum theory is large and multifaceted, there appears to be paucity in curricular research for non-Western countries. Perhaps the philosophical explorations that curriculum theory brings about are the luxury of the rich and powerful who don't have to wrestle fundamentally with questions of survival. The danger of this is that existing truths might be undergirded and become dominant truths in a global context. Hence, a fundamental notion when thinking about purpose of school has to be the cultivation of critical consciousness necessary for a worldview that goes beyond the truths learned and experienced through the curriculum.

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