



The Educational Organization Model in the Liberated Zones of Southeast Vietnam (1945–1975): Flexibility and Innovation under Wartime Conditions

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Abstract

This article examines the organizational model of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, highlighting its flexibility and innovation under conditions of protracted warfare. Drawing on revolutionary documents, provincial education histories, propaganda and training materials, and recent scholarly studies, the paper analyzes how the educational system was designed and operated within a fragmented war landscape comprising base areas, liberated territories, and contested zones. The findings indicate that education was structured through a decentralized yet politically unified framework, closely integrated with propaganda work, mass mobilization, and the training of local cadres. Schools were mobile and community-based, incorporating multiple functions such as literacy campaigns, cultural–political education, and vocational orientation. This model not only ensured the continuity of educational activities during wartime but also contributed to consolidating revolutionary authority, building grassroots political forces, and sustaining social cohesion. Moreover, the wartime education system laid both institutional and human-resource foundations for post-1975 educational reconstruction. The study suggests that education in conflict settings can be understood as a form of social organization capable of preserving communal continuity and reproducing political–cultural resources even under conditions of sustained military conflict.

Keywords: Educational, organizational model, liberated, zones, southeast, vietnam.

Introduction

Following the August Revolution of 1945, the establishment of a new educational system became an urgent task of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This objective was institutionalized through a series of decrees on the mass literacy movement (Provisional Government, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c) and was rapidly implemented nationwide. The mass literacy campaign not only sought to eradicate illiteracy but also laid the foundation for an educational system characterized by national identity, democratic principles, and service to the resistance cause (Chi, 2024; Hanh, 2018). During the resistance war against the French, particularly in Southern Vietnam, education was organized under conditions of warfare, dispersion, and material scarcity, yet it maintained continuity and a clearly defined political–

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social orientation (Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017; Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995).

In the period 1954–1975, within the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam—a strategic area encompassing Thu Dau Mot (present-day Binh Duong and Binh Phuoc), Dong Nai, Long An, and the Saigon–Gia Dinh region—the model of revolutionary education continued to be consolidated and developed amid increasingly intense warfare. The Central Propaganda and Education Commission of the Southern Central Office and the local propaganda apparatus played a pivotal role in directing educational activities (Bien, 2019; Nhu, 2002; Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010). At the same time, comprehensive studies on revolutionary education in Southern Vietnam have identified its flexible organizational characteristics and its close linkage with political force-building and the training of local cadres (Phat, 2004; Quan, 1996; Giang, 1995).

At the provincial level, educational histories of Binh Duong and Long An reveal the diverse adaptations of schools operating within a fragmented battlefield environment (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013), while specialized studies on Southeast Vietnam affirm the role of education as an integral component of revolutionary governance (Hanh, 2022; Hiep, 2014; Hiep & Think, 2014). In comparison with the educational system in South Vietnam during the same period (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024), the liberated-zone educational model stands out for its streamlined structure, decentralized organization, and high degree of adaptability.

Building upon these previous studies, this article analyzes the organizational model of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, elucidating its institutional structure, operational mechanisms, and the flexibility and innovation that enabled the system to function effectively under conditions of protracted warfare.

Literature Review

Research on revolutionary education in Vietnam during the period 1945–1975 has been relatively extensive; however, most studies have focused on policy orientations, guiding principles, and the general achievements of the new educational system. Comprehensive syntheses such as *Fifty Years of Education and Training Development* (Quan, 1996) and *From the Ministry of National Education to the Ministry of Education and Training* (Giang, 1995) provide an institutional overview at the national level. With regard to Southern Vietnam, the edited volume by Phat (2004) systematizes the experiences of revolutionary education during 1954–1975, while the chronological compilations of the Southern Regional Party Committee and the Southern Central Office

help situate education within its broader political leadership context (Nhu, 2002).

At the thematic level, studies on the mass literacy movement and literacy eradication campaigns have clarified the ideological and organizational foundations of revolutionary education (Chi, 2024; Hanh, 2018). Meanwhile, works addressing the resistance war against the French in Southern Vietnam emphasize the early adaptive features of resistance schooling models (Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017; Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995). Nevertheless, these studies largely concentrate on the 1945–1954 period or adopt a broad Southern Vietnam perspective.

In recent years, several studies have directly examined revolutionary education in Southeast Vietnam (Hanh, 2022; Hiep, 2014; Hiep & Think, 2014). Provincial histories of propaganda and education sectors further provide detailed documentation of institutional structures and practical operations (Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010; Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013). In addition, international scholarship on education during the Vietnam War highlights the interrelationship between education and politics, as well as the distinctions between parallel educational systems operating in South Vietnam (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024).

Despite these contributions, the “organizational model” and the concrete operational mechanisms of the educational system in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam have not yet been analyzed as an integrated structural–institutional whole. This gap constitutes the primary focus of the present study.

Research Methodology

This article employs a historical approach combined with structural–institutional analysis. The source base includes foundational legal documents (Provisional Government, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c), sectoral syntheses and national education histories (Giang, 1995; Quan, 1996; Phat, 2004), as well as provincial archival materials and specialized studies on the organization of propaganda and education work (Bien, 2019).

By cross-referencing central-level and local-level sources, the study reconstructs the organizational model of education in the liberated zones as a system operating under wartime conditions. This approach enables a clearer understanding of the system’s flexibility and adaptive capacity within the context of protracted armed conflict.

Results

Historical Context and the Organizational Imperatives of Education in Wartime

From 1945 to 1975, Southeast Vietnam constituted a strategically significant region. It functioned both as a gateway protecting Saigon—the political center of the Republic of Vietnam—and as a crucial operational area for revolutionary forces in the South. According to the chronological records of the Southern Regional Party Committee and the Southern Central Office, following the 1954 Geneva Accords the region was designated as Battlefield B2, an area characterized by intense and protracted military confrontation (Nhu, 2002). The activities of the Central Propaganda and Education Commission of the Southern Central Office indicate that education was embedded within broader political–military objectives, closely linked to propaganda, mass mobilization, and the consolidation of revolutionary bases (Bien, 2019).

Geopolitically, Southeast Vietnam encompassed provinces such as Thu Dau Mot (Binh Duong), Phuoc Long (Binh Phuoc), Bien Hoa (Dong Nai), Long An, and the Saigon–Gia Dinh area. Provincial histories of propaganda and education sectors reveal that the region was frequently divided into three types of zones: base areas, liberated zones, and contested areas (Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010). This territorial differentiation was not static but shifted in response to military developments, placing all forms of social organization—including education—in a state of constant adaptation.

In base areas and liberated zones, revolutionary authorities were gradually established and consolidated, creating relatively favorable conditions for organizing schools. However, physical infrastructure was virtually nonexistent. Schools were often constructed from bamboo and thatch, held in private homes or forest clearings, and frequently relocated as military operations expanded (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013). Retrospective accounts of teaching and learning during the resistance war against the French in Southern Vietnam indicate that the “resistance school” model developed between 1945 and 1954 was subsequently inherited and modified during the war against the United States (Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995; Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017).

Beyond material scarcity, demographic instability posed a major challenge. Many areas were subject to forced resettlement, the establishment of strategic hamlets, or continuous displacement due to military sweeps. Such conditions significantly hindered the maintenance of stable classes and consistent student enrollment (Hanh, 2022). In temporarily occupied zones, teachers and students engaged in

patriotic activities, forming educational and propaganda networks parallel to the official system of the Saigon government (Hiep & Think, 2014). In base areas, the construction of a national and democratic education system was regarded as an integral component of building a new social order (Hiep, 2014).

Under these circumstances, education did not merely pursue the enhancement of public literacy—an objective established in the first mass literacy decrees of 1945 (Provisional Government, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c)—but also directly served the need to build local political forces. Literacy eradication and cultural education campaigns in Southern Vietnam after 1945 were conceived as foundational for developing grassroots cadres at the commune and hamlet levels, as well as human resources for revolutionary institutions (Chi, 2024; Hanh, 2018). Syntheses of revolutionary education in Southern Vietnam further emphasize the role of schools in training mass mobilization workers, propaganda cadres, and local administrators (Phat, 2004; Quan, 1996).

Compared with the educational system of the Republic of Vietnam, which benefited from international support and relatively stable urban infrastructure (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024), the educational model in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam operated under conditions of dispersion, scarcity, and constant threat. Consequently, educational organization could not rely on fixed administrative–institutional models but instead had to align with the political–military structure of the revolutionary movement. Education became an organic component of the propaganda apparatus, operating under the direct leadership of Party committees at various levels and closely tied to battlefield imperatives (Bien, 2019; Nhu, 2002).

In sum, the characteristics of the Southeast Vietnamese battlefield—its wide and fragmented terrain, limited infrastructure, and fluctuating population—created a distinctive environment that compelled the revolutionary education system to adopt a highly flexible and adaptive organizational form. This context laid the groundwork for the emergence of a distinctly wartime educational model, in which the objective of raising literacy and educational standards consistently went hand in hand with the tasks of political mobilization and the training of local cadres for a protracted resistance struggle.

Organizational Structure of the Educational System in the Liberated Zones

The organizational structure of the educational system in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam during 1945–1975 did not emerge as a purely administrative institution; rather, it functioned as an organic component of the revolutionary political system. At the regional and battlefield levels, the Central Propaganda and Education Commission of the Southern Central Office exercised overall leadership in ideological, cultural, and educational affairs, ensuring alignment between political objectives and educational activities (Bien, 2019). The chronological

records of the Southern Regional Party Committee and the Southern Central Office indicate that education operated under the direct leadership of Party committees and was closely linked to strategies for consolidating base areas and expanding liberated zones (Nhu, 2002).

At the provincial and district levels, the organizational structure typically included a Propaganda and Education Commission or a specialized education section under the authority of the local Party committee. Provincial histories of propaganda and education sectors in Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc, Dong Nai, and Long An show that educational units were streamlined yet maintained a relatively clear division of responsibilities among literacy eradication, primary and lower-secondary education, and cadre training (Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010). This structure ensured centralized political leadership while allowing flexibility in practical implementation.

At the grassroots level, the educational system consisted of three principal components: (1) mass literacy and literacy eradication programs; (2) primary and lower-secondary schools; and (3) supplementary education and cadre training classes. The foundation of this system derived from the 1945 decrees on the mass literacy movement (Provisional Government, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c), which established both the legal and ideological basis for the nationwide dissemination of quốc ngữ literacy. In Southern Vietnam, literacy campaigns were widely implemented and closely integrated with grassroots political activities (Chi, 2024; Hanh, 2018).

Primary and lower-secondary schools in the liberated zones were typically organized according to the “resistance school” model, inheriting experiences from the anti-French resistance period (Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995; Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017). In Southeast Vietnam, schools were often located in forest areas, private homes, or dispersed across residential clusters to avoid detection by opposing forces (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013). The organizational structure was not rigidly based on fixed grade levels; instead, it adapted to local conditions through multi-grade classrooms, part-time schedules, or seasonal arrangements aligned with agricultural production cycles.

Alongside general education, supplementary education and cadre training held particular strategic importance. Syntheses of revolutionary education in Southern Vietnam emphasize that local cadre training was a strategic priority to ensure a steady supply of personnel for the revolutionary administrative apparatus (Phat, 2004; Quan, 1996). In the context of Southeast Vietnam—where military engagements were frequent—short-term, intensive training programs

closely connected to practical responsibilities were considered especially appropriate (Hanh, 2022).

Teachers and educational administrators were primarily recruited from local youth, grassroots cadres, or relatively well-educated students. They performed not only instructional duties but also engaged in propaganda and mass mobilization activities (Hiep, 2014; Hiep & Thinh, 2014). This organizational model clearly reflected the integration of education and politics, distinguishing it from the urban educational system of the Republic of Vietnam, which maintained a comparatively stable administrative structure and benefited from international support (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024).

Overall, the organizational structure of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam exhibited three defining characteristics. First, centralized leadership by Party committees and the Propaganda and Education apparatus ensured ideological and political coherence (Bien, 2019; Nhu, 2002). Second, the school system was decentralized, streamlined, and flexible, adapting to wartime conditions (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Multi-Author Books, 1995). Third, education was closely intertwined with the tasks of building political forces and training grassroots cadres (Phat, 2004; Hanh, 2022).

Thus, the organizational structure of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam was not merely a system of schools but a component of the revolutionary institutional framework, operating through the close interconnection of education, propaganda, and grassroots governance. It was precisely this structure that provided the foundation for the flexibility and innovation of the educational model under conditions of protracted warfare.

Flexibility and Creativity of the Educational Model

Under conditions of prolonged and constantly shifting warfare in Southeast Vietnam, flexibility and creativity were not merely supplementary features but became core operating principles of the educational model in the liberated zones. Unlike the relatively stable, administratively structured urban education system in South Vietnam (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024), revolutionary education had to adapt to dispersed combat, frequent sweeps, and severe material shortages. This context fostered the development of flexible, multifunctional organizational mechanisms capable of rapid re-establishment.

First, flexibility was evident in the model of mobile and decentralized schooling. In provinces such as Binh Duong, Dong Nai, Long An, and Binh Phuoc, schools could be temporarily set up in forests, private homes, or organized by residential clusters. When military operations intensified, classes were temporarily dissolved and quickly reassembled in new locations (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013; Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's

Commission, 2015; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005). Experiences from the anti-French resistance period in Southern Vietnam—particularly the flexible “resistance schools”—were inherited and further developed (Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995; Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017). This continuity highlights both institutional persistence and the system’s high adaptive capacity.

Second, flexibility manifested in management and leadership mechanisms. Education did not function as a separate administrative sector but was closely integrated with the propaganda and Party committee system. The Propaganda and Education Commission of the Central Office for South Vietnam and its local branches provided both political orientation and direct supervision of educational activities (Bien, 2019; Nhu, 2002; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010). This structure enabled rapid adjustment of educational objectives and content in response to battlefield demands—for example, intensifying the training of grassroots cadres when revolutionary movements expanded, or accelerating literacy campaigns in newly liberated areas (Phat, 2004; Quan, 1996).

Third, creativity was particularly evident in curricular content and teaching methods. Programs were often streamlined, focusing on basic literacy in the national script, elementary mathematics, and socio-political education (Chi, 2024; Hanh, 2018). Teaching materials were frequently compiled by teachers themselves, printed manually, or copied by hand to accommodate scarce resources. In base areas such as Thủ Dầu Một–Bình Dương, efforts to build a national and democratic education system closely linked to labor and production were regarded as context-appropriate innovations during wartime (Hiep, 2014; Hiep & Thinh, 2014).

Notably, the integration of study, labor, and combat represented a distinctive expression of creativity. Students and teachers were involved not only in teaching and learning but also in mass mobilization, self-sustaining production, and base defense (Hanh, 2022). Education thus functioned both as a channel for knowledge transmission and as a space for political training and community organization. Compared with the internationally supported urban education system with a clearly defined administrative structure (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024), the liberated-zone model relied primarily on endogenous resources and strong community cohesion.

Finally, flexibility was demonstrated in the system’s capacity to maintain educational continuity despite military upheavals. When territories were reoccupied or populations forcibly relocated, the educational network might temporarily contract but was not eradicated; teachers and cadres swiftly reorganized in other areas (Department of Education and Training of Binh Duong Province, 2004; Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015). This

reflects the system's non-rigid, decentralized character and affirms education as a durable component of the revolutionary institutional structure.

Overall, the flexibility and creativity of the educational model in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam stemmed from three factors: unified political leadership combined with flexible decentralized implementation; multifunctional integration of education, propaganda, and force-building; and sustained adaptability to conditions of dispersed warfare. These characteristics enabled the educational system not only to survive but also to actively contribute to consolidating the social foundations of revolutionary authority throughout three decades of conflict.

Discussion

The organizational model of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam (1945–1975) was not merely a wartime adaptive structure but also a crucial instrument for consolidating revolutionary authority and building local political forces. In the volatile B2 battlefield, education became a mode of social organization, contributing to the formation of political-cultural order in base areas and liberated zones (Nhu, 2002; Bien, 2019).

First, education played a central role in strengthening the legitimacy and governance capacity of revolutionary authorities at the grassroots level. The implementation of literacy campaigns and mass education immediately after 1945 affirmed the new government's commitment to the people's right to education (Provisional Government, 1945a, 1945b, 1945c; Chi, 2024). In Southeast Vietnam, under conditions of dispersed warfare, maintaining schools and training local cadres helped reinforce public trust in revolutionary governance (Hanh, 2022). Local histories of propaganda and education sectors indicate that educational activities were consistently linked to mass mobilization, Party-building, and the establishment of commune- and hamlet-level administrations (Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2015; Binh Phuoc Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2012; Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2005; Long An Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2010).

Second, the liberated-zone educational model directly contributed to the formation and development of local political forces. Supplementary education classes and short-term training programs supplied personnel for administrative bodies, mass mobilization, propaganda, and armed forces (Phat, 2004; Quan, 1996). The integration of education with socio-political activities fostered a cadre stratum drawn from local communities—individuals familiar with local realities and closely connected to the population (Hiep, 2014; Hiep & Thinh, 2014). This was particularly significant in strategic base areas such as Thủ Dầu Một–Bình Dương and Biên Hòa–Đồng Nai, where the

revolutionary movement required capable organizers with strong adaptive skills.

Moreover, the model's impact extended to sustaining and developing socio-cultural human resources during wartime. Summative studies of teaching and learning in Southern Vietnam during the two resistance wars demonstrate that, despite severe material shortages, the educational system trained multiple generations of students, helping preserve literacy levels and disseminate revolutionary cultural values (Multi-Author Books, 1991, 1995; Ho Chi Minh City Provincial Party Committee's Commission, 2017). After 1975, many educators and former students who had grown within the liberated-zone system continued contributing to the reconstruction and expansion of education in Southeast Vietnamese provinces (DEPBDP, 2004; Department of Education and Training of Long An Province, 2013). This continuity suggests that the wartime educational structure laid a foundation for postwar rebuilding and institutional development.

Compared with the education system of the Republic of Vietnam, which relied heavily on international aid and maintained a relatively stable urban administrative structure (Dror, 2018; Dung & Thao, 2024), the liberated-zone model emphasized endogenous resources and community cohesion. Its lean, decentralized, and flexible structure enabled survival under prolonged conflict. From an educational governance perspective, this can be interpreted as a form of "adaptive governance in wartime," in which unified political leadership (Bien, 2019) combined with flexible decentralization at the grassroots level to ensure rapid responses to military fluctuations.

These historical experiences offer insights for contemporary studies of education in conflict settings. Rather than evaluating education solely through infrastructure and school scale, it is necessary to consider education as a component of broader social governance systems, capable of mobilizing community resources and adapting to instability. The case of Southeast Vietnam demonstrates that even amid intense warfare, an educational model grounded in political-social integration and organizational flexibility could sustain continuous operation and generate long-term impact.

Overall, the organizational model of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam contributed to consolidating revolutionary governance, developing local political forces, and laying the groundwork for the post-1975 educational system. Its impact extended beyond literacy achievements or cadre training to shaping a mode of educational governance adaptable to conflict conditions—an experience of enduring relevance for research on education in exceptional or crisis contexts.

Conclusion

The study of the organizational model of education in the liberated zones of Southeast Vietnam during 1945–1975 demonstrates

that it was not merely a specialized professional institution, but an integral component of the revolutionary governance system under wartime conditions. In a vast and strategically significant region constantly affected by military operations, education was organized according to principles of flexibility, decentralization, and close alignment with the political and social demands of the revolutionary movement.

Analysis of the historical context, organizational structure, and operational mechanisms reveals three defining characteristics of this model: (1) unified political leadership combined with flexible grassroots implementation; (2) the integration of educational, propaganda, and force-building functions; and (3) a high degree of adaptability to material scarcity and complex military conditions. As a result, the educational system not only maintained continuous operation during wartime but also contributed to raising literacy levels, training local cadres, and strengthening the legitimacy of revolutionary authorities in the liberated zones.

The impact of this model extended beyond the wartime period. After 1975, the cadre corps and organizational foundations developed during the resistance years became the basis for the takeover, unification, and expansion of the educational system in Southeast Vietnamese provinces. Experiences in flexible organization, community resource mobilization, and the integration of education with socio-political tasks continued to influence the construction of the new educational system in peacetime.

From a theoretical perspective, the Southeast Vietnam case suggests an approach to studying education as a form of adaptive governance in contexts of conflict. Rather than viewing education solely as a public service dependent on stable conditions, it can be understood as a mode of social organization capable of sustaining community continuity and reproducing political-cultural resources even amid warfare. This constitutes a significant contribution to the historiography of Vietnamese education and offers valuable implications for comparative research on education in situations of conflict and transition.

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