

“Inward” globalization: A look at ethnic education in Vietnam

Quan Nguyen and Professor Rebecca Alexander

Department of Education Studies, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN 46135



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UNIVERSITY

Est. 1837

Abstract

Globalizing education, while continuously fueling transformative changes to the Vietnamese education system, is predominantly associated with an ‘outward’ expansion toward economically developed nations, instead of an ‘inward’ assessment of educational diversity and equality. How has Vietnam integrated the unique cultural and historical heritages of its 54 ethnic communities into the national educational goals? Across three decades, the established guiding principles, objectives, and solutions increasingly endorsed both national contribution and cultural preservation of ethnic minority students. However, this emerging philosophy tended to be deficit-focused, mainly using ethnic minority groups’ cultural uniqueness to make mainstream teaching materials more appropriate, implicitly assuming that ethnic minority education should be assimilated into the mainstream socio-economic and cultural mode. This paper reimagines these policies’ reflection of the understanding of (il)literacy, ethnicity, solidarity, and identity development in education, which help facilitate intercultural dialogue through and in education, especially with the dearth of research on multiethnic education in Vietnam.

Concepts & Methodology

This paper critically analyzes ethnic representation in education depicted in four official Education Development Strategy documents (EDS), particularly their guiding principles, goals, and solutions, in Vietnam since 1986, the beginning of the ‘*Đổi Mới – Renovation*’ period.

Inward Globalization An acknowledgement of a nation’s inhomogeneity of culture, economy, and social organization. Inward globalization is interconnected with outward globalization.

Framework 1: Multicultural Education (ME)

In alignment with Banks’s pursuit of cultural empowerment and cultural understanding (Banks, p2–6) amidst the rapidly globalizing world physically and ideologically (Wells et al, p.4), three dimensions of ME endorsed by Banks, namely ‘**content integration**’, ‘**prejudice reduction**’, and ‘**empowerment culture**’ will be used to compare the 4 EDS to Banks’s theorized multicultural education system.

Framework 2: Ethnic Studies

A grass root and local understanding of and contribution from the direct beneficiaries of multicultural education, namely the ethnic minority communities. Hu-DeHart (1993) provided a concise summary of the history of ethnic studies as an ever-changing concept, a multi-front movement, and a crucial academic contribution. Launched in 1968 at San Francisco State University, the ethnic studies movement was aimed at acknowledging the neglected histories and cultures of the “minorities” in the U.S. – namely Black, Asian American, and Chicano – as well as their contributions to the mainstream American story.

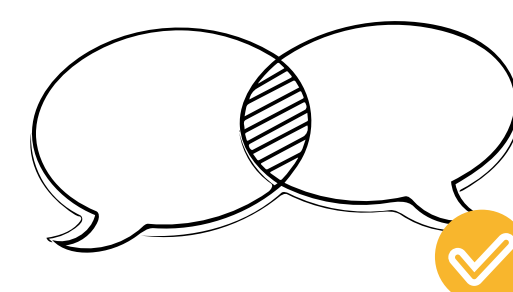
Findings

“National contribution” over “Cultural preservation”

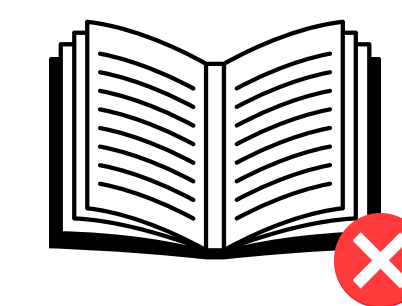
In the guiding principles, ‘national contribution,’ referring to education’s contribution toward economic growth and social equality, was usually more explicitly stated as one of the main goals of educational development than ‘cultural preservation.’



School network expansion



Intercultural pedagogical techniques



Multicultural curriculum renewal

A Deficit-based Solidarity

Narratives

Most curricular reforms were oriented towards technological development and foreign education exchange. Notes on inward globalization are mostly described indirectly, merging distinct ethnic backgrounds into a central educational narrative and indirectly erasing them from view.

- ‘national cultural identity’, ‘compatibility to each region’s socio-economic conditions’ (MoET, 2012, p.12);
- ‘traditional cultural values’ (MoET, 2012, p.11);
- ‘flexible curriculum for every student’ (MoET, 2012, p.11), ‘core values’ (MoET, 2021, p.7);
- ‘national pride’ (MoET, 2021, p.7).

Literacy

Ethnic minority communities to understand the ‘national language’ and learn their mother tongue, both verbally and in writing (EDS 01, p.12 and 21, p.5) simultaneously.

Textbooks (Trinh and Pham, 2023)

- Method: Count the number of mentions of ethnic minority communities and how they were depicted
- Finding:
 - Few represented cultural heritages
 - a tourist’s perspective’ instead of minority communities’ (p.60).

Limitations

My Positionality

Kinh (the majority community in Vietnam), male, middle-class.

Unresolved Questions

- What geographical, social, historical, and cultural factors contributed to the ethnic classification in Vietnam?
- What are the peculiar influences that the four EDSs had on minority communities?
- What were their perceptions and contributions toward these policies & regional orders, as well as outward/inward globalization & multicultural education?

Conclusion

Alongside various socio-economic and diplomatic improvements in the past 35 years, Vietnam has been raising the multi-faceted quality of the education system with a persistent and growing attention to ethnic diversity and inclusion. Their guiding viewpoints and three notable solutions – school expansion, curriculum reform, and pedagogy transformation – are constantly reminded in official documents with an orientation to leverage education equality and characteristic development in combination with knowledge and skill. The dominant narratives of these policies, however, still position ethnic minority communities as ‘backward’ in comparison to the Kinh majority by placing certain Kinh’s traits as the standard in terms of language and teaching content & methods.

The current education system is supported by a strong deep-rooted schooling structure, well-intentioned ethnic principles, and ongoing projects to uncover and preserve the cultural distinctions of each community. A multicultural education centralized on teaching students how to engage in intercultural dialogues and appreciate the diverse backgrounds of oneself and others will reduce harmful societal stereotypes and nurture an open mind for exploration.

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