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The Path from the Village: The Education of Thai Ethnic Students in Vietnam

Pang Van Lo

Dien Bien Teacher Training College, Dien Bien, Vietnam

Neil Welch

Flinders University, South Australia, Australia

Corresponding author: lovanpang@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper summarises the findings of a pilot study undertaken to explore what influences the schooling and education of Thai ethnic students living in rural mountain villages in one of the poorest and least educated regions of northern Vietnam. This study used a qualitative multiple case study approach and gathered information using multiple semi-structured interviews with four senior secondary students, their parents and their teachers. Two of these students were males and two were female, and two were achieving high grades while the others were achieving low grades. This study took a socio-ecological approach.

This study sheds light on what influenced the schooling and school experiences of four Thai ethnic secondary school students attending a remote rural school in Vietnam. The four student case studies illustrate the important interplay between family, school and community factors and the value of looking at schooling and school experiences from a socio-ecological perspective

Key words: Indigenous, remote, rural, Thai ethnic, socio-ecological, educational outcomes.

Introduction

The Thai ethnic community in Vietnam has lived in the mountains of Dien Bien province for nearly 12 centuries and have their own language and culture (Wyatt, 1984). This community makes up 38% of the total population in Dien Bien province which has a population of 490,306 (Census, 2009). Most of the Thai ethnic community live in small remote mountain villages and are reliant on small scale subsistence farming that involves growing rice, keeping livestock such as buffalos, fishing and gathering food from the forest, and traditional craftwork. The majority live at or below the poverty line. The Thai community is considered to be one of the most disadvantaged and least educated ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Most Thai adults have had little, if any, schooling, and are not proficient in speaking and reading Vietnamese, which is the language of school instruction and the language of general commerce in the towns and cities of Vietnam. Many Thai adults are not literate in any language.

There is a low school attendance rate and a high dropout rate among Thai ethnic students in Vietnam, despite school attendance being compulsory for all school age students. Less than 2% of the ethnic Thai students are currently completing their secondary schooling and going on to college or university (Census, 2011, p. 36), yet little was known about the key influences shaping these outcomes. Further research was needed to shed more light on this situation. Improving educational outcomes for ethnic minorities is a priority for the Vietnamese government and Ministry of Education. No previous study had specifically researched what was influencing the schooling of Thai ethnic students in Vietnam. This study—as part of the first author’s doctoral studies—helps to fill this gap in the literature.

The researcher is a member of the Thai ethnic community in Vietnam and was brought up in a Thai village in Vietnam and educated at isolated rural schools in northern Vietnam. He was the first member of his village to graduate from school and to become a teacher. After graduating as a teacher he taught at rural schools in northern Vietnam where there was a high percentage of Thai ethnic students. He has first hand knowledge and experience of teaching Thai ethnic students in Vietnamese schools.

Literature Review

Different countries take different approaches to the education of their ethnic minorities. There are differences between countries in relation to their educational policies, practices, school structures and the provision of resources. For example, some countries provide ethnic minorities with early school instruction in their mother language, while others provide bilingual education that includes the students' mother language and culture, while others provide ethnic schools where students can learn bilingually and study their own language and culture (Cincotta-Segi, 2011; Lee, Watt, & Frawley, 2015; Smith, 2003). Some schools assist ethnic minorities by providing them with extra teaching support in learning the language of classroom instruction as a second language, by employing local ethnic teachers and school assistants (Guenther & Disbray, 2015), and by incorporating place-based learning (Bartholomaeus, 2013) to make the curriculum more relevant for ethnic minority students. While schools and policies in some countries recognize and show an awareness and respect for the language, culture and identity of their ethnic minorities, others don't.

Researchers have discovered much about the impact of teaching practices and classroom relationships on student motivation, wellbeing and achievement (Varela, Kelcey, Reyes, Gould, & Sklar, 2013). A student's relationship with their teachers and peers, is now known to play an important role in student learning and engagement (Murray-Harvey, 2010). Negative relationships with teachers and peers is now recognized as detrimental to student learning and development (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Promoting learner well-being is now considered, by many, as needing to be a school priority (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010). Developing positive classroom relationships, peer acceptance, a sense of belonging, and establishing a safe classroom are no longer seen as simply desirable but as necessary conditions for effective student learning and achievement.

There is strong research evidence that teachers need to take steps to develop and maintain positive relationships with their students, to listen to their students' feelings, concerns and issues, to use a student-centred pedagogy, to respond to student fears and anxieties, and to promote and enhance student well-being (Duchesne, McMaugh, Bochner, & Krause, 2013; Shindler, 2010). This includes encouraging cross-cultural friendships, recognizing and valuing cultural differences, and being culturally sensitive and aware.

Methodology

The research question underpinning this study is 'What factors influence the schooling of rural Thai ethnic students living in the mountainous region of Dien Bien province in northern Vietnam?'

This study used a multiple case study methodology (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003) utilizing a socio-ecological approach. A socio-ecological approach studies behaviour from multiple perspectives not just from one person's perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). In socio-ecological theory people are not assumed to function independently of their family, school, neighbourhood, peer group, or the wider community. They are seen as living interdependent linked lives that are influenced by their social and physical environments and the social structures in which they live.

This means school learning is not seen as separate from peoples' personal and social lives. What happens in the classroom is not seen as unrelated or in isolation from what happens in the schoolyard or at home, and what happens at home is not divorced or separate from what happens in class or at school. According to Pendegast and Kaplan (2015) 'a child's learning and development occurs within a complex network of interpersonal relationships and multileveled social structures' (Pendegast & Kaplan, 2015, p. 64). The ethnic minority students' learning is shaped by their interpersonal relationships at home and school.

In this study data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Multiple interviews were held with each of the four student participants and seven of their teachers. There were also interviews with six of their parents and two grandparents. Because the parents and grandparents lived in remote villages without road access, it was only convenient to interview them once.

The researcher's interpretation of information collected was checked for validity and credibility using 'member checking' and 'peer debriefing'. Member checking (Creswell, 2012, p. 259) involved verifying interpretations with the participants themselves, while peer debriefing (Braithwaite, Moore, & Abetz, 2014) involved verifying general findings with a small group of non-participants who had knowledge of rural schools in Vietnam. (e.g., teachers, a school principal, and several post graduate students).

The researcher attempted to minimise biases in his interpretation of data collected by writing his own story of his schooling experiences, as a Thai ethnic student, growing up in a remote rural village in Vietnam. He then reflected upon how his own experiences may have shaped and influenced this study, and the interpretation of results.

Recruitment of Participants

Participation was voluntary and participants needed to give prior informed consent before taking part. No pressure was put on people to participate. Parent permission was required before students participated. Steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of interviews and the secure storage of data collected. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names for note taking and writing up the case studies.

Recruitment of participants was carried out in person by the researcher. Class teachers assisted in the recruitment of student participants by disseminating study information to potential participants and being the ones students approached when they were interested in volunteering.

Information about the study was provided in both Vietnamese and Thai to all potential participants, and participants could choose whether interviews were conducted in Thai or Vietnamese. Participants were required to sign a consent form before participating.

Data Analysis

The interviews with the students, teachers and parents were transcribed and four separate student case studies were constructed by triangulating data from the interviews. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to check the validity and credibility of these results.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance for the study was granted through the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC).

Results

The following vignettes are based on interview data from the student participants, their teachers and parents.

Kim

Kim is a year 12 female Thai student, 17 years of age, who comes from a poor farming family. She currently rents accommodation in the town and lives by herself so that she can attend school. The government gives her a subsidy to cover the cost of accommodation and living expenses. She comes from a village where it would take her more than an hour, riding a motorbike on a rough mostly unsealed mountain track to get to school. This track to school passes through a number of creeks and rivers. In the rainy season this track floods and can be impassable for days.

Kim is the eldest child in her family. She has a younger sister in year 10, and a brother in year three. Her parents are farmers who have had little schooling and know very little Vietnamese. Kim's father went to school until year three but her mother never went to school. The father has very limited literacy skills.

Kim's family relies on the family farm for their daily food and to generate an income. Their monthly income is so low that her family is considered extremely poor by the local authorities. This means that her family doesn't have to pay basic school fees and can get a free loan of textbooks from the school.

When Kim moved to the senior high school at the start of year 10, the distance to travel to school was much further, and she qualified for a Government subsidy (\$A36 a month) to enable her to rent accommodation in town. For Kim this means living alone, cooking for herself and managing a budget, and only going home at weekends. She has no one living in the town to keep an eye on her and act as a protector and mentor. Kim says that she is lonely, misses her family, finds it hard to concentrate on her study, and is distracted by the frequent visits and unwanted attention from boys living in the town who have left school. Kim says she loves school and has close female Thai friends in her class, but they, like her, struggle with the work and are often unable to give her much help when she needs it.

When she was living at home her parents were unable to help with her studies and the conditions at home did not make studying there easy. As a Thai girl, while living at home, she had a lot of chores and responsibilities to perform, no private space to do homework because there were no walls in the house, and no reference materials other than the textbooks she had on free loan from the school.

Kim is achieving low school grades and frequently has difficulties with the work but rarely feels confident enough to ask her teachers for help or to speak in class. She does seek help from her

close friends but only talks in class when she is asked a question by the teacher. Kim frequently does not understand her homework but struggles to do it on her own.

She constantly has difficulties speaking and writing in Vietnamese and finds it hard to express her ideas, to comprehend long texts, and to understand and use words in their correct context.

Kim does not receive any assistance with her Vietnamese or comprehension difficulties. She believes that if she achieved better grades she would be better liked and given more attention and help.

When she finishes school she wants to be a kindergarten teacher. This is because she loves little children and she thinks she is not good enough to get other jobs.

Hung

Hung is a year 11 Thai male student, 16 years of age, who lives in a hut in a village where everyone is Thai and communicates in the Thai language. It takes him more than an hour by bike to travel from this village to the school. The track is mostly unsealed and passes through a number of creeks and rivers. There are no bridges across these creeks and rivers and in the rainy season floods make the track impassable.

Hung's parents are farmers and he is the oldest child in the family. He has a younger brother in year seven. His family is very poor. The family lives in a small hut with few amenities and has been classified as poor by the local government authorities. This means his parents do not have to pay the main school fee and Hung qualifies for a free loan of school textbooks. But Hung's family does not qualify for other government subsidies, such as for food and accommodation, which are only given to families considered extremely poor. While the government exempts the family from paying the main school fee, it still has to pay a number of school fees such as those when Hung attends afternoon lessons.

Everyone in Hung's village is a farmer but farm income in this area is unreliable because their crops are frequently affected by disease and unfavourable weather. Hung's family only has a small plot of land to cultivate rice and the income they generate from this isn't sufficient to meet their family's needs. The family supplements its income by selling vegetables from their home garden and produce from their domestic animals.

Hung's parents have had more education than many other Thai villagers. His father said that he went to school until year 11 and his mother said that she went to year 3, but they claim that they are unable to help Hung with his schoolwork. Hung's parents only speak very elementary Vietnamese and have very little opportunity to use it because everyone in their village speaks Thai. Most people in Hung's village are illiterate and if they can speak Vietnamese it is only at a very elementary level.

Hung has many responsibilities at home. In order to do everything expected of him he gets up at about 5 am each day. When he comes home from school in the afternoon he helps his parents by labouring on the family farm and carrying out domestic duties and responsibilities until sunset when he returns home to have dinner to start his homework sometime after 8.30 pm. He goes to bed at around 11 pm and unfortunately by the time he is ready to start his homework he is physically tired.

Because there are no walls or rooms in the small hut, Hung does not have any private space in which to do his homework and is often distracted by his brother and parents moving around and

talking. In addition to being tired and distracted, he finds it difficult to complete his homework because he has trouble understanding the work and in knowing what he needs to do.

At school, Hung is getting below average grades in Maths, Vietnamese, English and Physics, and is struggling to understand and complete his work. Limited vocabulary, general knowledge and proficiency in Vietnamese, Science and English affect his learning.

Homework and schoolwork are big problems for Hung. When he has difficulties he does not seek help from his teachers or his parents. He knows his parents will not be able or willing to help him, and he is reluctant to ask his teachers because he does not feel close to them or confident to approach them. In class he is extremely quiet. While he knows several friendly Thai classmates he does not seek help from them because they are usually experiencing similar difficulties to him and besides he is not close to them. He tries to do his schoolwork and homework as best he can to avoid being punished by his teachers.

Hung has negative relationships with his parents, teachers and peers and receives little if any encouragement or support from them. He feels distant from his parents and does not talk much to them and sees his father as stressed, easily upset and frequently angry and critical. His Kinh classmates reject him and do not want to mix with him, and he was the target of bullying by Kinh students in year 7, and this experience still affects how he relates to his classmates. He sees his teachers as generally ignoring him, paying him little attention and at times just being critical. As a result Hung doesn't feel close to his parents, teachers or peers. He is a lonely, vulnerable student with no close friends or no support from anyone at school.

When Hung finishes school he wants to be an actor. He discovered that he loved acting when he participated in a school comedy sketch and received praise from his teachers.

Nam

Nam is a year 11 Thai male student, 16 years of age, who lives in village that has a mix of Thai and Kinh families. There are two Thai families and the rest are Kinh. It takes Nam up to 30 minutes to cycle to school but the track is mostly sealed and there are bridges over the creeks and rivers. This track is passable in the rainy season.

Nam has a twin brother who is in the same class, and an older sister who has finished school and attends college. His parents have had little schooling and are illiterate, but they highly value education and schooling. His father never went to school and his mother only attended school until year three. Both parents recognise education as the means by which Nam can achieve a much better and easier life than theirs. While they are unable to help Nam with his schoolwork they give him much support and encouragement, and make it easier for him to complete his homework by managing his family responsibilities and minimising possible distractions when he is working on homework. Nam often talks with his parents about what he is doing at school and his school experiences. He has a close supportive relationship with them.

Nam's parents are farmers but they do not have a reliable income. While they are not officially classified as poor they still have difficulty paying school fees and do not have the money to pay for extra voluntary lessons in the afternoon. Nam worries about the family's financial difficulties especially when the due date for paying school fees is approaching. He says it affects his concentration. Lack of money also means that he cannot afford to attend extra voluntary lessons in the afternoon when he wants or needs to do this.

Nam is achieving high grades at school and he has received many certificates for his excellent schoolwork. He has positive relationships with his teachers and classmates. Many of his friends are Kinh, who are also getting high grades at school.

Kinh friends support Nam in a number ways. They help him practise and improve his Vietnamese and provide him with feedback when he makes mistakes. When Nam has difficulties he often seeks their help. If they can't work it out they together seek their teacher's help. The closeness of the village to the town makes it possible for Nam to have some contact with his friends outside of school.

Nam gets on well with his teachers and because he is getting high grades he gets considerable support and encouragement from them. His teachers sometimes offer him free voluntary lessons in the afternoon, knowing that his family can't afford to pay for them.

When he leaves school Nam wants to study at the police academy. His parents support this plan knowing that while he is at the police academy the government will pay for his education, accommodation and food.

Mon

Mon is a year 12 female Thai student, 17 years of age, who lives in a village not far from the school. Most families in her village are Thai and communicate in Thai. It takes Mon up to 30 minutes to travel by bike from her home to school. The journey to school is on a part sealed and part unsealed mountain track. In the rainy season the unsealed section of the track becomes muddy and has to be walked, but it remains passable.

Mon is the youngest child in her family. She has an older brother who is serving in the army. Her mother left school in year three and has been farming all her life. She is a single parent who cannot work at present because of a mental health problem, and she and Mon now live with Mon's grandparents.

A number of Mon's extended family (i.e., her grandfather, uncles and aunts) are employed in government positions. Her grandfather, who Mon lives with, completed his middle schooling and has achieved certificates in health care. He is educated, proficient in Vietnamese and is employed as an officer in the local commune (council).

Mon's mother is officially classified as poor and this means she does not have to pay Mon's normal school fees and Mon can borrow textbooks for free from the school. This helps reduce the family's economic burden.

At home Mon is not required to perform domestic duties or farm work except in the summer school holidays. Her mother and grandparents just want her to concentrate on her studies and homework. This means she can begin her homework when she gets home after school. At home she has been provided with a desk, chair and lamp in a quiet corner of the house.

Her grandfather, aunts and uncles frequently help Mon with her homework. The grandfather also purchases and borrows books and magazines for Mon to read to improve her Vietnamese, reading skills, general knowledge, and knowledge of the Vietnamese culture.

Mon is a student who has achieved outstanding grades at school in subjects such as Maths, and has won two maths awards in provincial competitions. In the middle school she won a place in a special school for gifted students but declined it because it required her to live a long way from home and would have negatively affected her family financially and emotionally. Mon is achieving

well in nearly all subjects but she finds Vietnamese and Chemistry especially challenging. She sometimes has difficulties using Vietnamese and in pronouncing Vietnamese words correctly. A number of Vietnamese words and concepts do not exist in the Thai language and this can create difficulties for Mon.

Mon gets on very well with her teachers and peers. She is popular and has a number of Kinh and Thai friends who are high achieving students. Mon also has a close best friend who comes from a poor family and is an excellent student. Mon and her best friend support each other in their learning at school and in coping with personal issues and challenges.

Mon gets much emotional and practical support and encouragement from her teachers. They think highly of her abilities because of her high academic grades and give her special personal attention in class.

When Mon experiences difficulties with her work she can seek support from multiple sources. She is confident in seeking help and frequently seeks support from her best friend, her classmates, her teachers, her grandfather, and members of her extended family. Mon is not quiet or silent in class and is very confident. However she finds the pressure of continuing to achieve high grades stressful.

After completing school Mon wants to become a policewoman. She and her family have developed a detailed plan for her future education.

Situational Factors Shaping the Schooling of Study Participants

Teachers, student and parent participants in this study identified a number of situational factors that they perceived as shaping the nature and quality of the schooling of student participants. These factors are discussed below.

The National Curriculum

In Vietnam, all schools implement the same national standardised curriculum, lesson plans, textbooks, homework exercises and tests (Vietnam's National Educational Act of 2005). Schools teach the same lessons and administer the same tests simultaneously on the same day across the country. No allowance is made for local circumstances or for students with special needs. No allowance is made for ethnic minorities who lack the pre-requisite skills or knowledge to successfully master the curriculum or to cope with the prescribed pace of lessons. No allowances are made for learning difficulties, cultural differences or absences from school due to illness or because roads are impassable due to exceptional weather conditions. Students who miss lessons are required to catch up on their own.

The national curriculum does not take into account that rural Thai students have different cultural backgrounds, life experiences, resources and interests to Kinh students. There is no recognition that different groups of students may be motivated by different things. Not all students of the same age have the same skills, knowledge and readiness for engaging in and comprehending particular lessons.

The School Day

School operates six days a week from Monday to Saturday, with a one month break at the end of the year. There are five 45 minute lessons each day. Students get up at sunrise in order to get to

school by 7 am when school starts. School finishes at 11.30 am with 5 minute breaks between lessons for teachers to move between classes. There is a 15 minute break mid-morning and this time is often used for whole school assemblies.

There are no lunch or recess periods at school, and no school sport or after school activities that could facilitate social interaction or the development of peer friendships or teacher-student relationships. The structure of the school day is not conducive to the development of relationships or the breaking down of cultural barriers.

After finishing school at 11.30 am Thai students go to work on their family farm until the sun sets at around 7.30 pm. They then walk home several kilometres for their evening meal. “I start my day at 5 am and finish in the late evening. When I come home from the farm, I do not want to do anything but sleep. I feel tired and have no energy to homework. I just do what I can” (Hung).

Teachers sometimes offer extra optional lessons at the school in the afternoon but students have to pay to attend these lessons. Poor families cannot always afford for their children to attend these lessons or for their children not to be working on the family farm.

Teachers are expected to teach every lesson each day; there is no non-contact time. This means that there are few opportunities for teachers to observe the work of other teachers, to work with one another, or to learn from each other.

The School and its Facilities

The school had very limited resources for supporting teachers and for supporting students with special needs. There were no teacher assistants, clerical support staff or support teachers, and a lack of sport and playground equipment.

The school involved in this study had a population of 894 students, 428 boys and 466 girls. It catered for students from year 10 to year 12. 449 were students from the Thai community, 440 were from the Kinh community and 5 were from the Hmong community.

The school had 69 teachers teaching 14 subjects. These subjects were: Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Computer Science, Technology (consists of Agriculture/ Horticulture, Mechanics, Electronics and Design), Vietnamese (Literature), History, Geography, English, Physical Education, Defence Education, Civics and Information Technology. Besides teaching staff the school had one librarian, one accountant and one person involved with health issues. Of the 69 teachers five are Thai (i.e., three females and two males). The five Thai teachers specialised in teaching subjects such as Physics, English, Physical Education and Agriculture.

The school had 30 classrooms, two computer rooms, one language room and a library. It had only two toilets to cater for both staff and students; one was a female toilet and the other was for males. Most of the school area was taken up with classrooms and the outside area was an open space without any play equipment or shelter sheds. Each class usually had 30 to 45 students and students were likely to stay together with the same group of students through most of their senior secondary schooling.

The Challenges of Teaching in Remote Rural Schools

Teacher participants identified a number of challenges in teaching in remote rural schools in Vietnam. For example, many teachers need an additional income stream to supplement their teaching salary and there are fewer opportunities for achieving this in rural and remote areas. It

is also more costly to participate in professional development activities held in larger cities and towns because of the added transport and accommodation costs.

According to teacher participants most teachers prefer to teach in larger urban areas where there are more facilities and services, and closer to their families and communities. This results in difficulties in recruiting highly educated and experienced teachers to rural schools

Opportunities to Learn Vietnamese as a Second Language

All classroom instruction in Vietnam is in Vietnamese. Yet Thai ethnic students came from villages where villagers speak Thai and where very few adults were proficient in the Vietnamese language.

When the student participants started school they did not know any Vietnamese language. This meant they had to start learning Vietnamese from scratch at school. Yet the teachers did not explicitly teach Vietnamese as a second language to these students.

Most teachers at the target school did not speak Thai nor had they been given any professional development in teaching Vietnamese to ethnic students as second language learners. They were also ill-equipped to communicate with Thai parents who were not proficient in speaking Vietnamese.

Student participants identified lack of proficiency in Vietnamese as a critical source of ongoing difficulties at all levels of their schooling. All student participants spoke of peers laughing at them when they made mistakes with their Vietnamese language, resulting in them being reluctant to talk in class to avoid ridicule, feeling inferior or being ashamed. While their teachers explained the quietness of Thai students as shyness, the students themselves saw it very differently.

Student participants indicated that they didn't just need help in becoming proficient in speaking and writing in Vietnamese in the junior primary school. They needed extra support in speaking and writing Vietnamese throughout their primary and secondary schooling and they saw all teachers had an important role to play in doing this.

Geographical Isolation

Thai ethnic students live in small villages scattered through the mountains and valleys of Dien Bien province. Thai students came from 150 villages to attend the research study school. Only a small number of families live in each village and on average only one or two students go to high school from each village.

Travel between the villages and from the villages to the school is mostly on narrow unsealed tracks that cross creeks and rivers where there are often no bridges, and the tracks are subject to flooding in the rainy season. Sections of these tracks are inaccessible to cars, buses and trucks, but are usually accessible to bikes and motorbikes. When tracks are flooded they are often impassable for days and students needing to use them are unable to travel to school.

The distance between the villages and the town and the poor transport system between them, contributes to the lack of interaction and intercultural awareness and understanding between Kinh (Vietnamese) and Thai communities. Many adults in the Thai villages have never travelled outside their village or farm, and many Kinh families have never visited a Thai village.

There is little interaction between villages because of the distances between them, their isolation and the long hours spent farming seven days a week. Many adults living in villages have spent

nearly their whole lives in the one village, and only have the opportunity to interact with each other at Thai festivals organised once or twice a year.

Awareness and Understanding of Ethnic Cultures

Teachers interviewed in this study had very little awareness, understanding or appreciation of Thai culture, language, traditions, village life or the challenges confronting Thai students in their schooling. While teachers recognised that they had Thai students in their classes they did not take steps to accommodate their special needs in relation to learning Vietnamese or understanding Vietnamese culture.

While the 2005 National Education Act sets out as priorities that ethnic minorities be given the opportunity to learn their oral and written language, and that those living in disadvantaged areas will be given priority in their learning, these priorities still require practical steps to implement them.

The Belief that Treating Students as Equals is Equity

Teachers and student participants in this study proudly and confidently articulated the belief that treating students as equals is equity, during interviews. This belief seemed to be expressed as a way of justifying why all students are given exactly the same instruction without any accommodation for special learning needs. There appeared to be no appreciation that some students may need special measures in order to be ready for or to benefit from 'normal' classroom instruction. There was also no recognition that teachers had a responsibility to attempt to overcome problems such as when students felt inferior, incapable or inadequate. Thomas Jefferson (1783-1826) made an important comment on this issue when he wrote 'There is nothing more unequal, than the equal treatment of unequal people'.

Subsistence Farming

Most Thai ethnic families living in villages are dependent on near subsistence farming to eke out a living. They are dependent on having fertile soil, enough land, reliable and adequate rainfall, generally favourable weather conditions and healthy domestic animals.

They are usually dependent on their children working on the family farm in the afternoons after school, to carry out labouring work such as digging, weeding, collecting firewood, looking after buffaloes, pigs and chickens, gathering bamboo shoots and wild vegetables, hunting and fishing. Unfortunately subsistence farming is very dependent on the weather, and when the crops fail, families have difficulty finding enough food to survive or income to pay school fees. It can be a real struggle to survive. Only one of the four student participants in this study was not required to work on the family farm.

Thai subsistence farmers are dependent on farming rice and growing whatever food they need for their survival, and often they spend their evenings engaged in traditional craftwork. Girls and women sew and make cloths, while men and boys construct things out of timber and metal.

Subsistence farmers have few amenities or labour saving devices (e.g., no toilet, no bathroom, no separate rooms in their house, no water taps, no refrigerator, no oven, no heater, no tractor, no truck, no power tools, no village shops, no public transport from the village to the school or town). They are reliant on manual labour.

Lack of a reliable farm income is a source of continual stress and insecurity. When crops failed this had serious consequences for a family's ability to pay school fees and to feed and clothe themselves. Mon's father said "We have only two crops of rice each year but these crops much

depend on the weather. When the crop is poor we do not know how to get enough money to pay for my kids' school fees”.

Parental Support for Their Children's Schooling

In this study parent support for students' studies was very limited. It was limited by the parents' illiteracy, very minimal schooling, lack of proficiency with Vietnamese, the long hours they had to spend working on the family farm, their very limited finances to pay for additional lessons at school or to buy useful resources, and their need to have their children working on the family farm.

Two of the parent participants in this study had never attended school and those who had, did not finish their primary schooling.

In Vietnam there are two compulsory teacher-parent meetings a year and Thai ethnic parents who participated in this study were reluctant to attend these meetings. They were reluctant to attend because they said they were made to feel inferior at these meetings, lacked confidence in communicating with teachers because of their limited Vietnamese, and were fearful of being asked for a donation towards buying school equipment when they did not have any spare money and felt embarrassed when they could not afford to donate. They also believed that teachers blamed them if their child had any schooling difficulties and found it insulting when teachers lectured them about what they should be doing to help their children at home.

In one interview a high school teacher claimed, "Thai students are too lazy and their parents are not strict enough with them. They don't force them to do their homework." But as one parent said: "I really want to help my kids but I cannot. How can I help them when I have never been to school."

Teachers blaming students or parents when students don't complete homework signals a lack of understanding of underlying difficulties.

Thai Ethnic Students Often Feel Inferior to Their Kinh Classmates

Student participants expressed having a sense of inferiority in relation to their Kinh classmates. This sense of inferiority stemmed from receiving lower grades than Kinh classmates, not being as proficient in the use of Vietnamese, having less positive interaction with their teachers, their parent's limited finances and schooling, having less facilities at home and the school ignoring their Thai language and culture. As a result of this sense of inferiority, all but one of the student participants said they lacked confidence to ask and answer questions in class, and did not initiate communications with teachers or other students. Teacher participants interpreted this reticence to talk in class as either shyness or a lack of ability, not because of a sense of inferiority.

Teachers in Rural Vietnam are Not Concerned with How Their Students Feel

In the West, how students feel and their sense of well-being are often seen as important determinants of student motivation, engagement and performance. In rural Vietnam, student participants said they were rarely if ever asked to express their feelings or opinions. One participant said "I haven't told people about my feelings before because I didn't think they wanted to hear about them."

Given the direct connection between how a student feels and how he or she thinks and acts, a lack of interest in how students feel, will impede teachers' understanding of student behaviour. It

limits the way teachers know their students. Ignoring students' feelings sends the message that their feelings don't matter, and that possibly the teacher doesn't care about them.

Professional Development of Teachers

Teacher participants said that they only participated in one week's professional development each year. This professional development was held in the summer school break and organised at the regional level. As teachers they did not have any say in what was included in the program or how the program was run, "We merely have the chance to have professional development. The conferences or workshops are organized in the big cities. We do not have sufficient funds for this. In addition, we are too busy with our teaching at school" (Mai, a teacher).

Teachers indicated that they had not received any teacher training or professional development in the use of student-centred teaching practices. Use of student-centred teaching practices involves teachers listening to students' feelings, promoting well-being, and working collaboratively with students to resolve learning, social and behavioural difficulties.

Limitations of this Study

This study has a number of limitations that need to be taken into account when considering the findings. This study only had a small sample size and it is unknown how well some of the influences identified in this study apply to other Thai students in Vietnam.

Participants in this study did not include children who had never attended school, or who had dropped out of school, or who were attending a school in an urban area. A more diverse group of student participants would have helped identify the schooling challenges faced by other groups of Thai students in Vietnam. Given that student participants were year 11 secondary students, their experiences and perceptions of their early schooling may not accurately have reflected the experiences and perceptions of students currently in pre-school and primary schools.

Information in this study was only gathered by means of semi-structured interviews. Collecting data from additional sources could have contributed to enhancing the credibility and validity of this study. For example, classroom observations and gathering information from classmates could have shed light on classroom dynamics, in-class relationships, and teaching practices.

Some words in Thai and Vietnamese do not have equivalent words or phrases. Since some interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and others in Thai, it was challenging at times to compare answers, when words used were either not equivalent or there was no such word in the other language.

For student participants who possess good literacy skills it may have been advantageous to use a questionnaire to supplement data gathered from face-to-face interviews. Older Thai students are very familiar and comfortable working individually on work sheets and questionnaires. Use of questionnaires would have provided an additional method of collecting information and another way of assessing the credibility and validity of the interview data.

Student participants may have been more comfortable being interviewed as a pair in the presence of a familiar supportive peer. One-on-one conversations with an unknown adult, such as a researcher, are very uncommon in the Thai culture in rural Vietnam. Interviews with an interviewer in the presence of a known supportive peer may have resulted in greater comfort and in greater disclosure of schooling experiences.

One area that deserves more attention is how gender influences the schooling experiences and outcomes of students. A female Thai interviewer may have been able to elicit more information and disclosure from female student participants.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on what influenced the schooling and school experiences of four Thai ethnic secondary school students attending a remote rural school in Vietnam. These four student case studies illustrate the important interplay between family, school and community factors and the value of looking at schooling and school experiences from a socio-ecological perspective.

In this study a number of situational givens were identified by participants as playing a key role in shaping the schooling and life experiences of Thai ethnic students and their teachers and parents. This study recognises schooling is embedded in environmental, situational and cultural contexts and is shaped by people's lives, families and schools.

Rural Thai ethnic students have to overcome many social, cultural, economic, geographical and educational challenges in order to complete their schooling and to achieve their high school certificate. For rural Thai ethnic students in Vietnam, education is the primary means of escaping the financial and daily hardship associated with near subsistence farming, providing them with an opportunity to access further education and training, and to enter careers that enable them to better participate in and share in Vietnam's development and growing economic prosperity. Education is a key investment in the future and development of Vietnam and its multicultural community.

This study has identified several areas where changes could enhance the educational engagement, participation and academic outcomes of Thai ethnic students. In order to do this there is a need to review the national curriculum and its implementation, to promote teaching practices that address student diversity and meet the special learning needs of ethnic students, to improve the professional development and ongoing support of teachers, to reduce the workload of teachers, for teachers and schools to recognise, respect and be aware of the ethnic languages and cultures of their school communities, and to develop more productive teacher-parent communications and relationships. Such changes would help promote the development of a more equitable multi-cultural society, to promote cultural understanding and acceptance, and enhance the participation or educational outcomes of Thai ethnic students.

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