

Inequalities in learning in Vietnam: Teachers' beliefs about and classroom practices for ethnic minorities

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Global and national education agendas are concerned with improving quality of learning outcomes, and with it, a corollary concern, inequalities in learning. Policies aimed at improving quality and equality are often directed at improving teacher pedagogy, curriculum and materials, and instructional time. Despite addressing these quality components, inequalities often persist. This paper provides an analysis of an interesting case, Vietnam, because it is regarded as having high learning outcomes (on PISA tests) and less inequality in learning. But national data and test outcomes in grade 10 mask the hidden inequalities that exist between minoritized groups and majority (Kinh) students. Drawing on data from a qualitative classroom study of secondary teachers across 10 provinces in Vietnam, we examine the role of teachers' beliefs, curricular designs and action in the classroom (Gale et al., 2017). We show that teachers' beliefs, curricular design – or the use of hegemonic curriculum and instructional practices, and their actions in the classroom reproduce inequalities, resulting in minoritized students achieving at the basic level, and not excelling in higher order competencies, as Kinh students do. This study, with its use of video recordings alongside teacher reflective interviews, has implications for how we can examine and reveal underlying inequalities as they are reproduced in subtle classroom practices. It suggests that policies need to focus on the social-cultural aspects of teaching, or the societal beliefs and norms, in addition to the material and technical aspects.

Introduction

As an important social institution, schools can create possibilities and opportunities for people to develop their full potential. In reality, though, schools continue to be places that generate and perpetuate inequalities and injustices particularly for minoritized¹ groups of students. Literature from various country contexts has demonstrated that schooling sustains a dominant narrative that systematically excludes minoritized individuals, whether racial and ethnic, gender, sexual or lower social class (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tuck, 2012; Jayachandran, 2015). While policies have attempted to make schools an inclusive space, such factors as school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy continue to reproduce inequities (Kao & Thompson, 2003; O’Day & Smith, 2016; Domina et al., 2017).

Many education systems that have overall high learning outcomes, as measured on national or international tests, are faced with often hidden inequalities in learning. In Vietnam, inequalities are particularly evident between minoritized and the majority groups, with ethnic minorities (as a group, and then specific groups within them) having lower learning levels in primary learning outcomes, lower secondary participation and lower secondary completion (Rolleston & Iyer, 2018; Dang & Glewwe, 2018; World Bank, 2019). There are many reasons for these learning inequalities, including access to schools, materials and other resources; and the training/qualification of teachers. Another reason for lower performance is the language of instruction, and whether students have learned the national language sufficiently to be able to do well (Truong, 2011b; UNICEF, 2015). Policy responses to these problems are informed by a functionalist approach to the education system – one in which policy makers identify the relevant parts of the problem and then offer technical solutions, such as building schools, providing textbooks and other resources, and improving training of teachers.

Another perspective, informed by critical theory and a social-cultural perspective, argues that inequalities are created in and exacerbated by the social structures and norms of society, including those operating in schools. The social norms and practices within the education system

¹ “Ethnic minorities” is a common and dominant term used in Vietnam. In this paper, we use “minoritized” to reflect our conceptual understanding of the different forms of prejudices experienced by ethnic minorities. We use ethnic minority at times to refer to the different groups of students and when teachers refer to this term.

reflect taken-for-granted beliefs, attitudes and practices that have an effect on teaching and learning, and in turn, reproduce inequalities that exist in the larger society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Levinson, et al, 2015). Inequalities can manifest from differing expectations that teachers have of students who are “different” or minoritized by society; they can show up in response to policies that require the national language as the language of instruction, even though there are some attempts to incorporate bi-lingual or multi-lingual approaches (see, e.g., Save the Children, 2015; UNICEF, 2015; Nguyen & Hamid, 2018). A critical perspective examines how discriminatory attitudes and practices persist in systems and create differential outcomes. These different bodies of research inform various policies and approaches used to address inequalities in learning. For example, improving the quality of learning in Vietnam has included increasing the qualifications and training that teachers have. The government’s latest reform also includes a competency-based curriculum and enhanced teacher pedagogy. But changes to teachers’ qualifications, the majority who are Kinh, state-designed curriculum, and pedagogy may or may not address underlying beliefs and practices that reflect societal norms and expectations of minoritized and Kinh students. The case of Vietnam provides a perplexing puzzle that has relevance for other education systems aiming to address quality and equality: Can inequalities in learning be addressed by having qualified teachers using updated curriculum and pedagogy, but they still hold beliefs that some students cannot learn as well? Can teachers have sufficient resources to teach but still use teaching practices that do not enable some students to achieve their potential? In this paper, we examine these tensions of how to address inequalities in learning among minoritized ethnic groups in Vietnam by asking about the beliefs, curricular design, and practices or actions of teachers who are well trained and work in a system that fosters high performing students by most accounts.

The specific research questions we aim to answer in this paper are: Do teachers hold differing perceptions of minoritized and Kinh (majority) students’ learning abilities, and how do their beliefs affect teaching? How do teachers’ beliefs manifest in their use of curriculum, and specific teaching pedagogies, and how does this affect how students learn? These are critical questions for educators and policymakers who are looking to ensure that lower achieving students learn and achieve, with equitable support. It is also important in the context of Vietnam because some data suggest that teachers do attend to lower achieving students to help them learn, but they do so

by attending to students' ability to achieve at the basic learning level so they pass (Rolleston & Iyer, 2019). But achieving at the basic level is insufficient for continuing onto high levels of education, and it does not provide students with the learning they aspire to or may be capable of.

In this paper, we address these questions by first situating educational inequities within the larger political, social and economic environment that influences beliefs and practices of schooling for minoritized ethnic groups in Vietnam. We then discuss Gale, Mills, and Cross' (2017) socially inclusive pedagogical framework as a way to analyze how beliefs influence classroom design and practices. Our analysis shows that teachers' beliefs that ethnic minority students are incompetent influence their expectations of students as well as their classroom practices. We contrast these commonly held beliefs and practices with examples of teachers' beliefs about and classroom practices with Kinh majority students.

Minoritized Ethnic Groups and Schooling in Vietnam

In Vietnam, minoritized ethnic groups (ethnic groups other than the Kinh and Hoa) have lower primary learning outcomes, lower secondary participation and lower secondary completion than the Kinh majority. Vietnam has concertedly tried various policy initiatives and pro-poor programs to increase school participation rates at primary and lower secondary levels, and enrollment rates have increased as a result. For instance, the gross enrollment rate for lower secondary has seen a steady increase to 93.4% in 2015 from 90.8% in 2010 (MOET, 2017, p. 31). However, these rates vary considerably by region, and are correlated with rurality, poverty and ethnicity. But, upper secondary has a considerably lower rate of enrollment, at 63.4% in 2015 (p. 31). Furthermore, minoritized groups' participation in lower secondary is lower than that of the Kinh majority group, and while it has remained constant, it has not improved the gap as much over recent years (MOET, 2017, p. 36). Dang and Glewwe (2018) report that the gap between ethnic minority and Kinh majority students persists, and while it initially decreased between the mid-1990s to the late 1990s (to 10% points), since 2000, the gap persists even as the overall rate of secondary school enrollment has increased (p. 9). In addition, they show a worrisome trend in upper-secondary education, where the gap has actually increased (30% after 2010) due to declining enrollment by ethnic minorities at this level. So while analyses of PISA data on math, reading and science tests show that Vietnam has better equity in learning outcomes

than many other systems, in which students from poorest quintile out-perform students from the highest quintiles in other countries (OECD, 2016), this finding may actually understate the inequities because ethnic minorities are already less represented in grade 10 when these tests are taken. Other studies that examine learning outcomes based on ethnicity, rather than poverty, found inequities between Kinh majority and minoritized students. In a recent analysis of secondary students' achievement in math, Rolleston and Iyer (2018) found that prior math learning predicted later math achievement, and ethnic minority students tended to have lower levels of prior learning. These studies suggest that while there are overall improvements in educational participation and learning outcomes, further examination is needed to understand why students from minoritized ethnic groups in Vietnam do not fare as well.

Like elsewhere in the world, schooling in Vietnam is situated within political, economic and social-cultural norms that affect who and how citizens are included into society (Tran & Walter, 2010; DeJaeghere et al., 2015). Politically, schooling in Vietnam is used to support nationalist objectives and discourses of integration and assimilation of all groups within a socialist society. A single and unified curriculum (as well as a set of state-sanctioned textbooks), Vietnamese as the national language and language of instruction, and teachers and students who serve in the teachers' and youth unions that are used to share the socialist ideology are all mechanisms for this political integration (Doan, 2005; Salomon & Vu, 2007; Lucius, 2009). For instance, Truong's (2011b) study shows how language of instruction has been used to integrate ethnic minorities in schooling and the larger society. In the Central Highlands, Vietnamese language has long been used as the medium of instruction in schools. But since 2004, M'Nong language was supposed to be officially taught as a subject starting in grade three through upper secondary school. Yet Truong argues that before 1975, more teachers were M'Nong and M'Nong language was particularly used at the early grade levels, which is the opposite of the current policy. Further, she notes that teachers' altruism represented by reaching out to students to encourage their schooling was motivated by their role as enlightening the masses, a state goal promulgated through the party structures, including the teachers' union.

Bi-lingual programs or mother tongue are used for the early years of schooling in some provinces, though they are used to transition students to the national official language,

Vietnamese (Kosonen, 2004; Le et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2015). And in some cases, local languages have been written and are being taught as subjects, but not the language of instruction, throughout basic education years (see Truong, 2011). An underlying purpose for teaching mother tongue languages or improving Kinh instruction for non-Kinh speakers is to create an integrated national identity and to support national economic development. Scholars have also shown how the history and civics education curriculum in Vietnam is used to impart Marxist-Leninist ideology and principles of unity, nationalism, and assimilation (Doan, 2005; Salomon & Vu, 2007; Lucius, 2017; Duong, forthcoming). Noting the explicit emphasis on political socialization of schooling in Vietnam, this body of research demonstrates the ways in which the education system continues to promote social cohesion under the banner of national identity and solidarity instead of endorsing forms of diversity.

Vietnam's economy is based on a socialist-market ideology, which has sought since *Doi Moi* (in 1986) to integrate into a global capitalist economy, but based in socialist principles, including attending to economic inequalities in society. Teaching market-oriented skills, including the new competency-based curriculum, strengthening vocational/technical education, and reducing economic constraints to participating in schooling are all ways that school reforms have aimed to promote development of the socialist-market society. Policies since *Doi Moi* have focused on improving the participation and learning of ethnic minorities by addressing economic barriers. Program 135 (Resolution No.30a/2008/NQ-CP of Government) specifically provides stipends, materials and other resources to families who qualify as poor, or ethnic minorities living in mountainous regions (in regions identified as poor). Provinces and districts have also used funding allocated through national poverty reduction programs to build schools, buy textbooks and other materials so that those living in villages have closer access to school, and so the schools meet the criteria for quality education.

Yet despite participation in schooling, Truong's (2011) research in the Central Highlands, particularly among the M'Nong minority, found that schooling is not regarded as producing upward mobility – as desired by the government and by families themselves. Rather, it reproduces structural inequalities between the majority Kinh and minority groups. She also found that schools are unable to produce M'Nong graduates to work in a changing economy

because existing ethnic tensions inhibit their education and recruiting graduates into these positions. Luong and Nieke (2013) also found a similar skepticism among H'mong that their educational credentials would allow them to secure employment. Without the connections to secure a job, or financial means to pay for these necessary connections, their education did not bring the promised value of economic mobility (UNICEF, 2015; World Bank, 2019). This lack of economic integration of minoritized populations is in part related to social-cultural norms that portray ethnic minorities as “Other” and “backward.”

Social-culturally, Vietnam is shaped by its history as a colonized country, with revolutionary movements, wars and internal struggles that have exacerbated divisions among different identities, including ethnic group identities. As a result, a nationalist orientation and the principle of unity, as discussed above, became a national priority. But on a social-cultural level, ethnic minority groups have long been considered “backward” and lacking in the cultural practices and values needed for a unified and developed country. Research studies have shown how the discourses of backwardness and poverty have long been associated with ethnic minorities in state policies and public discourse since the founding of Vietnam (Taylor, 2004; Giacchino-Baker, 2007; DeJaeghere et al., 2014; Bui, 2014; World Bank, 2019). These policies specifically aim to change ethnic minority cultural practices in order to improve ethnic minorities lives, and to make progress as a nation. These discourses and policies affect the daily interactions between Kinh majority and ethnic minority groups within communities and schools. For instance, McElwee's (2008) study of the interactions between ethnic minorities and the Kinh majority in the mountainous central coast region (Trùng Sơn) found that, despite years of living together due to migration, stereotypes of ethnic minorities as being backward, ignorant, or lacking aptitude persist. She also notes that despite government efforts to foster integration, the social relations among Kinh and ethnic minorities are largely separated, exacerbating problems of Kinh economic and cultural dominance. These problems, she suggests, are due to different perceptions and values of social relations. She uses the example of a Kinh person suggesting that ethnic minorities don't have an aptitude for math because they do not track their income or expenses, but rather prefer to operate within a social and economic relations of exchange. These conflicts based on different social and economic relations between the Kinh and minoritized groups

influence practices in school, including the kinds of knowledge deemed important to be an educated – and not a “backward or ignorant” – person.

Other studies have shown that ethnic minorities internalize these perceptions as minoritized groups. Luong and Nieke (2013), in a study on teaching practices in primary schools for H'mong children, found that students regarded themselves as disadvantaged, and they feared being ridiculed by others if they spoke up in class. These feelings also extended to teachers and head-teachers who were from minoritized ethnic groups. A deputy head-teacher captured this status: “I always feel that ...being H'mong..., I myself have a feeling of being marginalized in the school. I hold an inferior position in the relationship with my colleagues though I am the deputy headmaster of this school (p. 20). Even when students make it through basic education, their minoritized status continues. Tran and Walters (2010), in their interviews of ethnic minority students at the university level, note that a predominant feeling among students of various ethnicities is that teachers and the Kinh majority students do not believe they have the competence to achieve at a high level in school. Sometimes this is attributed to their language abilities and use; sometimes to the poor economic backgrounds of their families, or their quality of schooling. Whatever the reason, the belief that ethnic minorities are less competent is found across studies examining policies, teachers and student discourses.

Studies of different ethnic groups in Vietnam (H'mong, M'Nong, Khmer, and smaller groups including the Bru and Pak Co) consistently find that ethnic minority families and young people value schooling and value being integrated into the economic life and improving their livelihoods (Truong, 2011a; 2011b). But in examining their relationship to the majority Kinh society, teachers and community members often characterize ethnic minorities as not valuing schooling and not as competent in certain ways of learning. It is important to ask, then, how teachers' beliefs and practices reflect these dominant beliefs, and how they shape their pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Conceptual framework

While access to schools, materials and other resources, including the quality of the teacher as well as language of instruction have all been used to address inequalities in Vietnam, these

solutions tend to focus on “student places”, or (re)distribution policies related to access, resources, participation, and completion, rather than recognition and legitimation of voices and knowledges of minoritized people (Gale et al., 2017, p. 348). As a result, discriminatory attitudes towards different ethnic minority groups in Vietnam persist, pointing to the prevalent deficit discourse in which ethnic minority students continue to be regarded as backward, ignorant, and in need of “catching up” with the mainstream (see McElwee, 2008; Truong, 2011; Bui, 2014; DeJaeghere, et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2019; World Bank, 2019).

In this study, we draw on the socially inclusive pedagogy framework that Gale, Mills, and Cross (2017) put forward. Based in critical theory and a politics of transformation (Fraser, 1997; Connell, 2007), Gale et al. (2017) argue that pedagogy is the first and most strategic place to resolve disadvantage problems and achieve social justice. In order to build such a socially inclusive pedagogy, they propose three principles: belief, design, and actions on which to create opportunities for all students to fully engage in education (Gale et al., 2017, p. 347). Teachers’ beliefs or their dispositions are foundational to open up opportunities for recognizing and legitimating diverse knowledges and ways of knowing. Instead of considering students from under-represented groups in terms of their deficits, teachers with socially inclusive pedagogy regard students’ knowledge and skills as assets that would contribute to the learning environment. Informed by such a belief, teachers come to value and challenge ideas of difference by developing relevant tactics to leverage students’ “funds of knowledge” in ways that respect as well as legitimate these existing knowledges (Moll, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Wrigley, Lingard, & Thomson, 2012). In addition to teachers’ beliefs and tactics to utilize students’ assets, the second principle of socially inclusive pedagogy, design, requires a critical engagement with social structures that sustain exclusivities through the development of a counter-hegemonic pedagogy (Connell, 1993). Such a pedagogical strategy requires a need to balance two seemingly contradictory efforts towards building a socially inclusive classroom: (a) providing students with necessary knowledge and skills traditionally valued in the mainstream system, and (b) mitigating the “disempowering effects of the hegemonic curriculum” (Mills & Gale, 2010 cited in Gale et al. 2017, p. 351). Some authors acknowledged this “dual imperative” to be pedagogically challenging yet worth pursuing because, as Wrigley et al. (2012) indicate, it embraces the commitment to epistemological inclusion. Finally, the third principle of socially inclusive

pedagogy is actions, representing specific pedagogic practices that aim to work with rather than act on students and their communities. This involves helping students make sense of their worlds as they negotiate the many different social spaces and identities they are learning as students, learners and young people.

This study examines if and how Vietnamese teachers attend to all students' learning needs and outcomes, drawing comparisons across classrooms with ethnic minority and Kinh majority students. By providing insights into how teachers' beliefs inform their design and actions, the socially inclusive pedagogy framework assists in making sense of data related to teachers who worked with minoritized and majority group students. In this regard, the framework helps shed light on the conditions and extent to which teachers attempted (or failed) to develop and enact socially inclusive practices in their classes, particularly in the socio-political context of Vietnam with a centralized state run educational system. Relevant inferences can also be made concerning the interplay between societal discourses and teaching practices that perpetuate inequalities in learning.

The Study

This paper draws on data from a longitudinal classroom study of teaching and learning in grades 7-9 of lower secondary schools in Vietnam, with data collection occurring in the fall of 2017, 2018 and 2019; for this analysis we use data from grades 7 and 8 only. This qualitative video and interview study of teachers' pedagogical practices took place in 20 secondary schools in 10 provinces across the northern, central and southern regions of Vietnam. Two to three schools per province (usually in different districts) were randomly selected from the provinces, and two teachers, one math and one language/literature, were selected from each grade to interview and observe. For this paper, we analyzed data from Grade 7 and Grade 8 math and language/literature teachers who taught mostly ethnic minority students in their classroom; we compared themes from their interviews/videos with teachers who taught mostly Kinh students. See the table below for the sub-sample of teachers/classrooms analyzed for this paper.

We found, as did Truong (2011b) in her study, that many classrooms in schools continue to be segregated by ethnicity, though in some schools, classrooms may have a combination of several

different ethnic groups. The classrooms analyzed in this paper included students from the following minoritized groups: H'mong, Mang, Tho, Cadong, Tay, Nung and Khmer. Some classrooms also had the Thai students, though this group is generally considered to be educationally “successful,” as their educational participation is highly similar to the Kinh majority and the Hoa (Chinese ethnic group) (see Baulch et al., 2002).

For this paper, we analyzed data from seven provinces from the 2017 observations/interviews and nine provinces in the 2018 data. The total number of teachers in 2017 and 2018 that we analyzed is 30 and 38, respectively. This includes an equal number of Math and Literature teachers of each year. This study includes 38 classrooms (2017) and 36 classrooms (2018) that have mostly ethnic minority students. All pre-lesson and post-lesson teacher interviews and two videos of teachers teaching these ethnic minority classrooms were analyzed to get insight into their beliefs, design and teaching practices for ethnic minority students. To illustrate the comparative differences in beliefs, expectations and teaching practices, the study included 22 Kinh classrooms (2017) and 40 Kinh classrooms (2018) from these schools. One video is used as an exemplary case from these classrooms in the analysis section (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of teachers² and classrooms³ with Kinh and ethnic minority students

Province/Schools	Number of teachers		Number of classrooms with Kinh students		Number of classrooms with ethnic minority students	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
Cao Bang (4 schools)	8	8	0	0	14 (Tay/Nung)	14 (Tay/Nung)
Lai Chau (1 school)	2	2	0	0	4 (H'Mong, Thai, Mang)	4 (H'Mong, Thai, Mang)
Kien Giang (2 schools)	4	4	4	4	4 (Khmer)	4 (Khmer)
Nghe An (2 schools)	4	4	6	4	2 (Tho)	4 (Tho/Thai)

² The number of teachers includes math and literature teachers, and the total does not match the number of classrooms because some teachers teach multiple classes. Also, some schools have only 1 class (e.g., 8a) selected for the study, and others have 2 or 3 classes (e.g., 8a, 8b).

³ The number of classrooms includes both math and literature for the selected classes (eg., 7A or 8b) from the school.

Quang Nam (2 schools)	4	4	4	4	4 (Ca Dong; Kor)	2 (Ca Dong)
Tra Vinh (3 schools)	6	6	4	4	10 (Khmer)	8 (Khmer)
Binh Thuan (1 school)	2	2	4	4	0	0
Lam Dong (2 schools)	0	4	0	10	0	0
Quang Tri (2 schools)	0	4	0	10	0	0
Total	30	38	22	40	38	36

Methods

This study regards teaching as a complex and interactive social-cultural practice. To capture this complexity, multiple methods were used: video observations of teachers and students, document collection (of teacher lesson plans, student work, and assessments) and teacher and principal interviews. Recently, video classroom studies have been used to understand teaching and learning because it allows researchers to look at high inference level interactions, discourses and teaching processes that cannot be easily captured in a quantitative classroom observation (Klette, 2009), nor even of a qualitative ethnographic study where the researcher takes extensive notes of the classroom teaching and interactions. Furthermore, examining the detailed data of these interactions and discourses allow researchers to capture “teaching as a cultural activity” (Stigler et al., 2000, p. 87), meaning that the content, pedagogy and learning strategies used in classrooms are grounded in the cultural contexts of the education system, and the teachers and students. The video protocol used for this study is based on data collection practices conducted in the TIMSS video study (1999) and the World Bank Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) study (Parandekar, et al., 2017). The video data included two cameras, one focused exclusively on the teacher and whole classroom, the other on students, including groups of students. Two to three lessons (usually 50 minutes each) of math and literature/language were recorded over a few days during a week-long visit to the schools. While these lessons show us how a teacher teaches, not having lessons over a longer period of time limits our understanding of teachers’ practices. Still, we returned to the schools over three years and saw some similar teaching patterns.

In addition to videos that show teachers' practices in the classroom, a pre-lesson interview was conducted with teachers to gather initial data about teachers' typical teaching approach, their beliefs, and their plan for the lessons that were recorded. These data show how teachers thought about their teaching practice. A post-lesson interview with teachers used prompts from the video-recorded lesson by viewing sections of the lesson and discussing what was taught and asking the teacher to reflect on her teaching practice. Documents, such as lesson plans, student work and assessments, allowed us to analyze specific teacher plans (lesson plan) and student enactment and achievement of learning objectives. We also conducted interviews with principals to understand their support of teachers and their knowledge of teaching practice.

Data analysis

To understand how teaching and learning are contextually situated within discourses and beliefs about ethnic minorities, we sought to understand what a teacher intended to do in the classroom and why, and how s/he reflected on what was taught and whether it allowed students to achieve learning outcomes. For this analysis, we first identified classrooms that were mostly ethnic minority students, and then, we identified classrooms where there were mostly Kinh majority students. We examined the patterns that emerged in teachers' pre-lesson interviews about teaching ethnic minority students, and their beliefs and expectations for this group of students. Then we analyzed their classroom videos to discern whether and how their teaching practices reflected these beliefs or not. We examined these videos for whether and how teachers were teaching the dominant knowledge and perspective, or whether and how they drew on students' own knowledge as well as how they used counter-hegemonic practices in the classroom. Then, the teachers' post-lesson interviews were analyzed to study teachers' reflection on how ethnic minority students studied in class and what they actually learned in the recorded lessons, and in some cases, what teachers did to support ethnic minority students to learn. We then compared these analyses with the beliefs and practices exemplified by teachers in Kinh student classrooms. Similarly, we sought patterns of teaching practices in these Kinh classroom videos and analyzed the teaching practices that teachers use with Kinh students. Finally, these patterns are linked with lower or higher performance among students in these classrooms. Based on data from the school about student performance, as well as test outcomes on math and literature from a

complementary study, we refer to classrooms as low, medium or high achieving in our discussion of the findings.

Findings

We found that most teachers in this study do not demonstrate a kind of pedagogic work that is socially inclusive. Rather, they utilize dominant discourses about ethnic minorities as being less competent, and these beliefs are reinforced through a hegemonic curriculum that focuses on learning Vietnamese and national cultural content as well as achieving basic standards for all students. Finally, teachers' actions in the classroom act upon students by lecturing and asking them to provide answers that are in the textbook rather than connecting learning to their lives. These beliefs and teaching practices persist despite teachers having the standard qualifications and access to resources. Specifically, many teachers in our study hold a bachelor degree, though the requirement for the lower secondary level is an associate degree. Teachers also receive professional development annually on diverse teaching methods; a majority of teachers had received training on developing students' competencies, which is a focus of the upcoming curriculum reform. They also participate in regular mentoring meetings to share teaching experiences and observe classrooms. In addition, teachers in almost all schools with ethnic minority student classrooms have access to technology such as computers, televisions or projectors in their class. Teachers commented that this equipment greatly supports their teaching and engages students in lessons.

In this section, we present findings according to the three components suggested by Gale et al's. framework to illustrate the extent and the ways teachers' pedagogic work is organized in a socially inclusive manner. We illustrate these beliefs, design and actions through examples from teachers from different schools teaching different ethnic groups. We have also selected a case summary of one teacher to illustrate the connection between these beliefs, design and actions to show how they are interconnected in ways that do not allow for ethnic minority students in this class to effectively learn. This case also illustrates teachers' contrasting beliefs between ethnic minority and Kinh students, and the different teaching pedagogies they use for different learning outcomes. Finally, the last section shows data about teachers' beliefs about and practices with Kinh students.

Beliefs: “Ethnic Minority Students are Incompetent”

A majority of teachers teaching ethnic minority students held beliefs and engaged in pedagogical practices that clearly assume that they are not as capable or competent in learning. “Poor cognitive ability,” “low level of thinking,” and “slow in studying and acquiring knowledge” were common words used by teachers to refer to students’ ability to learn. An exchange in a post-lesson interview with a Grade 7 Kinh Math teacher at a school with 70% of the students from the Cadong ethnic group in central Vietnam where the students are generally low performing on achievement tests illustrates this belief. When asked about the reason she did not achieve the lesson objectives she planned, she said “that was because of students’ level of thinking. Their level of thinking was not high, and that was also because of the student population here - a lot of them were minorities, ethnic minorities. [It was] Because of the students.”

Some teachers attribute ethnic minority students’ incompetence to their inability to understand and speak Vietnamese, though teachers do not regard it as only a language acquisition issue. They believe it is a reflection of overall intelligence or competence. Ethnic minorities’ lack of language proficiency in the “Kinh language”⁴ was always discussed by these teachers when they shared difficulties they have when teaching ethnic minority students. For example, a language/literature teacher, who taught a classroom of Tay and Nung students in a mountainous area in the north, shared “because students in this class are ethnic minority students, so surely they do not know the vocabulary’s meaning and hence cannot solve it [exercise].” The students of this school also have low performance on achievement tests. Almost all teachers and principals at schools that have ethnic minority students agreed that they should improve students’ communication competency because they are shy and not fluent in Vietnamese. But often being “shy” was conflated with an inability to speak Vietnamese, even though some teachers recognized that students have good Vietnamese skills. For example, one teacher said: “they do not dare to answer even though they know [the answers].” But teachers continue to assume that they are shy, not willing to speak in class, or incompetent, and they do not recognize that the

⁴ “Kinh” or “the Kinh language” is the term that many ethnic minorities use when referring to the Vietnamese language (also see in World Bank, 2019)

curriculum and their teaching practices, which often correct students to ensure they acquire the official knowledge, further silence students.

Curricular Design: Teaching dominant knowledge and skills

Teaching dominant knowledge and skills, such as Kinh language and nationalist topics in the curriculum, further marginalize ethnic minority students from learning in the classroom.

Furthermore, a strict adherence to how students were to learn these topics silenced students' engagement. Teachers often remarked that ethnic minority students are quiet, but they do not give these students chances to speak freely without corrections or to share ideas beyond an expected response. For example, in a math classroom at a school which has mostly H'mong, Thai and Mang students whose performances on achievement tests are medium, a student raised his hand to answer the teacher's question. But then he did not answer the question when he was called. In the post-interview reflection, the teacher commented that the student probably understood the knowledge because he wanted to answer the question, but he did not have enough vocabulary to present his answer. But the teacher did not help the student with his answer, or ask him to show it. Instead, he called another student to answer the question. Similarly, in language and literature classes, we often saw teachers correcting a student's pronunciation or word choice, and then moving on to another student to give the "correct" answer. In this way, teachers' belief that students need to speak Kinh language proficiently is evident in their "design" or approach to teaching that aims to provide students with the dominant knowledge that the state and teachers regard as critical to learn. Teachers rarely offered a counter-hegemonic approach that mitigates disempowering effects of the Kinh language curriculum.

Teachers' orientation to the hegemonic Kinh language curriculum is also evident in how they regard students' use of their local cultural knowledge or language. For example, in a literature/language class in a school with low achievement test performance, Tay, Nung and Dao students were studying different genres of poems. Students, working in groups, were asked to match the title of poems, often referring to nationalist themes – not local ethnic lives – with the correct genre. A group of students were using their native language to discuss the poems. Later, when discussing the session in the post-interview, the teacher did not encourage students' use of their home language. Rather, she suggested that students used it "secretly", as they were not

allowed to do so, although she understood that they did so because they were not comfortable using Kinh language: “I think when they are not sure about their ideas, they do not confidently use Kinh language. That is why they use their [native] language to discuss secretly”.

Actions: Didactic teaching to “fill” ethnic minority students with basic knowledge

Teachers’ beliefs about ethnic minority students’ lack of Kinh language abilities along with their use of a hegemonic curriculum design that required them to be proficient in it further resulted in teachers concluding that they simply cannot achieve high levels of learning because they are not able to think critically or creatively. Classroom videos show that most teachers used didactic instruction in a way that aimed to clarify terms and improve pronunciation. While these approaches are useful for learning the foundations of language, when coupled with the tactics above – of correcting pronunciation or not giving an opportunity to use Kinh language to solidify their learning — these practices tend to hinder student learning. In addition, teachers usually asked ethnic minority students to read information in the textbook to improve their reading skill, and then asked them basic questions about the content that they could re-iterate from the text, all without having to fully understand what they were learning. The following instance is from a school where students’ overall performance on achievement tests are low. In a literature lesson with mostly Cadong and Kor students, the teacher taught a poem from a famous Kinh author. The poem was about a soldier seeing things that reminded him of his grandmother on his way to the battlefield. Most of the time, the teacher asked students questions about the author, her writing style, her life and the context when the poem was written. Answers to these questions were easily found in the Literature textbook. Meanwhile, the vocabulary used in the poem was quite difficult for all students and the teacher did not clarify words and meanings for students. Rather, he asked students to “read at home” the section of the textbook that explained difficult words used in the poem. In the interview with the teacher, he said that learning (Kinh) language was a concern for students at this school:

So the competency to learn the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, is very important, so I usually focus on these competencies for the students. Generally, it is difficult with ethnic minority students. It is honestly easier with Kinh students. And with listening, speaking, reading, writing, this is a big problem [for ethnic minority students].

Thus, instructing ethnic minority students to read explanations of complicated vocabulary at home indicates that he thought they might not learn it in any case or that it wasn't important for them to learn. In addition to not teaching students to acquire sufficient Kinh language to understand the content, this teacher also used classroom practices that could not enhance either language or content learning. For example, he said he tended to lecture 70-80% of the lesson time, which we confirmed in the video. But if students need to acquire the hegemonic knowledge and skills, including Kinh language in these specific content areas, in order to achieve on tests and to have overall learning competencies, then speaking at students and asking them questions that can be answered in the text does not allow for such learning.

Teachers explicitly connected their beliefs about the differences between ethnic minority students' thinking abilities and those of Kinh students with different ways that they teach them and their expectations for learning outcomes. For instance, a teacher, who identified as Dao, shared: "Thai and Kinh students have better cognitive ability, so I can use questions with logical thinking characteristics, harder questions, as compared to the other students. For H'mong and Mang students, I use more open-ended questions". While the data show that a handful of teachers used some activities to engage ethnic minority students in group work, games, and asking higher-order questions, it is not clear if these teaching tactics were used to connect to students' knowledge, nor if they were consistently applied throughout the semester and with other classes, beyond the observation/recorded classes. Most often, teachers expected ethnic minority students to only learn the required knowledge, as this grade seven Math teacher of Cadong students said:

With ethnic minority students, their level of thinking or calculating is very low. I mean the more difficult thinking parts, I can leave that for Kinh students, and easier parts ... for example, about thinking, thinking to find out new knowledge can be for Kinh students, and the easier parts like practice and application, I leave that for minority students.

In sum, students from ethnic minority groups are minoritized – holding a lower status – as they are expected to merely acquire basic knowledge, the “easier, simpler knowledge [that is] easier to understand”, as this teacher agreed.

An Exemplary Case of a Teacher's Beliefs and Practices that Minoritize Students

This exemplary case is from a school in which students are low performing on achievement exams. The grade 8 math teacher in this case has 30 years of teaching experience at lower secondary level. Recently, he received training on developing students' competencies and he said that such competencies are the most important objectives of the math subject. During our interviews, he also showed knowledge about active pedagogies, such as using group work, role play or integrating teaching across disciplines. However, these teaching practices as well as attempts to develop competencies were not performed in his class, which had mostly Cadong ethnic minority students. From his perspective, ethnic minority students were incompetent not only because of language barriers, but because of their poor cognitive capabilities, which he explicitly compared with Kinh students. In his post-lesson interview, he said that the students only achieved 35% of the objectives of an algebra revision lesson. When asked whether students could not understand the lesson because they had a language barrier, the teacher said "No, it is not the language barrier but the root cause is the poor cognitive capability." Then he further clarified: "It's not that they don't understand language. Their language is better than my language. They know their own language. Now they know Vietnamese, and they study English. They know three languages. I only know Vietnamese." Additionally, "[t]hey like physical activities. They are bad at intellectual activities such as calculating and thinking."

The excerpt below from the post-lesson interview further shows how he discussed students' performance in group work, comparing the learning abilities of ethnic minority and Kinh students. Earlier in the lesson, students learned the definition of a polynomial fraction and the condition for two polynomial fractions to be equal. In this activity, he gave students an exercise in the textbook which gave two equal polynomial fractions and asked students to prove why they are equal.

Teacher: ... In this group, there is only one Kinh student and the remaining are ethnic minority ones. Similarly, in the other groups, there is only one Kinh student and the remaining are minority ones.

Interviewer: Ah, [student 1], [student 2] are Kinh students, aren't they? So the students who can complete the assignments are Kinh ones, aren't they? Is there any minority one who can finish the task?

Teacher: No, so I said that the competency-based teaching is only relevant to Kinh students. It really challenges the ethnic minority ones. With the minority ones, we need to deliver very specific and practical teaching in order to achieve the objectives. We cannot let minority students self-think [work independently] with the assignment.

Interviewer: What is the reason for this?

Teacher: Their cognitive capability is very poor. Out of 100 ethnic minority students, 99 have poor cognition.

It can be inferred from this teacher's perspective that ethnic students do not bring knowledge to the learning environment, thus, the teaching practices need to provide them with knowledge – a sort of “banking approach to teaching” – to fill up “empty vessels” (Freire, 2000). From this approach, the Math teacher mainly used lecture and recitation (questions with scripted answers) in the three lessons we recorded. This pedagogical approach does not reflect his recent training on competency-based teaching and learning, which focused on using group work to achieve competencies. He was aware of the value of group work: “[if] students [want to] seek knowledge on their own, they must work in groups”. However, most of the time he used question-answer, and almost all his questions were about content knowledge and students always read from the textbook to give answers. Even if he had students work in groups, it often was to identify answers to questions from the text. For example, when teaching another lesson about rhombus shapes, his question for a group activity was to identify the properties of the two diagonals of a rhombus. The answer for this question could be found in the textbook. Hence, all groups did it correctly, and the teacher summed up what the text said. However, they could not explain why the rhombus' diagonals had such properties later in the lesson. The teacher also used a version of group work in which he put students together to answer questions he posed with the intention that it would foster “interaction competency [cooperation]”. But he believed that this pedagogy only worked with Kinh students:

. . . teaching using group activity and assigning tasks can only be used with Kinh students. It is difficult to use them with ethnic minority students . . . [and] weak students [ethnic minority students] . . . they are absent frequently and lazy. Their understanding is

uneven and has limitations. . . .[Ethnic minority] Students' ability to interact with each other is bad as a result of their bad knowledge and study ability. Once their study ability is bad, they cannot interact with each other.

His expectations of students raise a concern about when and why a teacher should use group work, and whether he expected students to learn the knowledge and cooperation competency through this activity or whether students must have this competency in order to perform well in group work. Ethnic minority students need the former, he suggested – to learn the knowledge from others and in engaging ways, but the teacher's expectation was the latter, that they had the knowledge and could now communicate it. In sum, the teacher's beliefs about ethnic minority students' cognitive incompetence are reflected in the overall design and practices of the classroom. He does not expect them to learn the knowledge, nor does he give them the tools to learn it.

Kinh Students Have “Better Cognitive Abilities” and Higher Learning Outcomes

Similar to the belief about Kinh students of the teacher in the case study above, many teachers who had taught Kinh students strongly believed they can “learn faster” and have “better cognitive ability” than ethnic minority students. In classrooms which had both ethnic minority and Kinh students, teachers expected the latter group to be tutors for ethnic minority students, meaning they could support ethnic minority students to study in class and ethnic minority students could learn from them. In addition, even the number of Kinh students in a class could affect teachers' overall assessment of the whole class' performance. Several teachers shared that a class performed better than another class because “it has more Kinh students”. This reference to Kinh students' abilities and using these students to teach ethnic minority students suggests that teachers intentionally design the classroom to perpetuate the status and ideas of the dominant group.

These beliefs about Kinh students' superiority in learning manifested in activities teachers designed for students. For example, teachers often had separate set of questions – high order thinking questions that required students' ability “to think” in order to answer - just for Kinh students. In a majority Kinh student classroom, teachers not only asked questions about content knowledge in textbooks, but they also asked questions to serve various purposes, such as to

check if students understand particular learned knowledge, connect old and new knowledge, or identify new knowledge. For example, in a grade 8 geometry lesson about a square at a school in which students have high performing results in achievement tests, a teacher asked students to define a square using information they already studied about a rectangle. This gave students an opportunity to present their understanding about a square and to see the connection between the two shapes. By doing this, the teacher could evaluate students' existing knowledge as well as enable their engagement in the lesson. For similar lessons about shapes in ethnic minority student classrooms, several teachers provided definitions of shapes without asking students, while a few other teachers showed attempts to have students draw on their past knowledge. However, the teachers did not give ethnic minority students an opportunity to use their understanding, but rather interrupted or did not wait for a response and rather finished their own question by providing them the definitions.

Another example of teachers teaching Kinh students in ways that draw on their past knowledge and experiences was in a lesson about euphemisms in a grade 8 classroom. In this lesson, a language/literature teacher went beyond the textbook to ask Kinh students about their own experiences and knowledge by requesting them to find more synonyms of a word besides the synonyms given in the textbook and share how they understood those synonyms and their experience using them. This illustrated that teachers assumed students had experiences and knowledge they could contribute to the classroom rather than filling them with knowledge, as in the case of the ethnic minority students above. In addition, the teachers of the Kinh student classrooms also tended to ask more "why" questions that encouraged students to explain their answers further and deepen their knowledge. For instance, in a grade 8 lesson about rhombus at a school with high performing results in student achievement tests, a Math teacher asked students to identify the new property of a rhombus that a parallelogram does not have. When a student was able to answer the question by looking at the textbook, the teacher asked students to use their prior learned knowledge to prove the property. Students then worked together and were able to correctly prove it. This kind of question required students to think and activate their prior knowledge and helped students to understand the knowledge better. In sum, Kinh students are given more challenging activities to develop their competencies and to contribute their knowledge to lessons than their ethnic minority peers.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, as shown in the above analysis, teachers' use of the curriculum and their pedagogical actions in the classroom in relation to teaching ethnic minority students were found to be far from socially inclusive. If the 'two-ways' approach to designing pedagogy involves adding students' voices, experiences and home languages to the mainstream learning discourse (Delpit et al., 1993; Delpit, 2006), teachers in this study structured the lessons with an 'one-way' approach whereby ethnic minority students were taught dominant knowledge (from the scripted curriculum) and given little chance to express themselves and connect with their cultural experiences. Findings in this study corroborate other research, indicating that good teaching for many Vietnamese teachers generally means providing content knowledge and morality to students (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019; Phan & Phan, 2006). Viewed through this 'good teaching' framing, (ethnic minority) students tend to be positioned as subjects of teaching, or what Freire referred to as "empty vessels" (Freire, 2000), ones that need to be filled up and enlightened, rather than actors of learning who are expected to bring knowledge to the learning environment. In this "banking approach" to teaching, opportunities for ethnic minority students to fully participate in the mainstream are even more limited as their cultures and voices are not valued and they are not equipped with capabilities sufficient to engage with dominance (Gale et al., 2017).

While evidence in this study also reveals that a small number of teachers did appreciate ethnic minorities' cultures and hold high expectations towards both Kinh and non-Kinh students (a point we are developing in other papers), most teachers were not able to enact an appropriate pedagogy built on both dominance and difference. In this regard, pedagogical design, as an important mid-point at which perception turns into action or practice, may indicate challenges structured within the school and the system that constrain the transformation of teachers' practice.

One of the challenges mentioned by many interviewed teachers concerns the dependence on textbooks, which gave them little space to add any outside content to the prescriptive curriculum. Given the centralized state run educational system with restrictive guidelines, this study's findings echo other research, pointing to the strict adherence of many schools and teachers to the

“one-size-fits-all” textbooks (Bui, 2014; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019; MOET, 2015). As such, despite identified areas of inappropriateness in textbook content pertaining to disadvantaged minority students (Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019), teachers are under pressure to follow the hegemonic curriculum to satisfy the requirements of the higher authorities. Instead of reacting to the needs and interests of under-represented students, most teachers and schools are practically occupied with pursuing “performance achievements” (i.e. credit mania) so as to look good to the authorities (see, e.g., Quyet Tuan, 2019; Thanh An, 2020). This is also a reason for teachers’ providing ethnic minority students with basic knowledge only, or teaching the “incompetent” at the right level so they can achieve just enough, as evidenced in this study.

The absence of social inclusive pedagogy in most of the observed classes may also be explained by policy responses to inequalities in learning that further reinforce the hegemonic curriculum. These policies include the rigid adoption of the national language as the language of instruction and tracking practice in which students are systematically grouped based on their overall academic achievement. For instance, schools involved in the current study commonly had classrooms A and B that were considered the better performing students, while the C and lower classes included lower performing students, often those that may not continue to upper secondary. Although such practices are prevalent in various contexts, available evidence suggests that they contribute to increasing gaps in educational attainment and achievement (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Domina et al., 2017).

From a critical perspective, we argue that teachers’ discriminatory beliefs are greatly shaped by social norms and structures, ones that sustain the deficit discourse whereby people from disadvantaged groups are considered in terms of deficits rather than assets. Evidence in this study and past research shows how such social prejudice and misperceptions are perpetuated in a way that even ethnic minority teachers internalize and use them unintentionally (Lavoie, 2011; Luong & Nieke, 2014). This is because the adverse discourse is deeply anchored within schools, in teacher education programs, and in the larger Vietnamese society, where social hierarchies dominate almost all social relations and a lack of appreciation for diversity and pluralism is manifest (DeJaeghere et al., 2009, 2015; Giacchino-Baker, 2007; Luong & Nieke, 2014; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019; Truong, 2011; World Bank, 2019). In this context, schools operate to

maintain social order through the sustenance of a class system rather than promoting class mobility and equity. As such, underprivileged individuals continue to be minoritized and inequalities pertaining to ethnic minorities are further exacerbated. Contributing to available evidence on educational inequalities in contemporary Vietnam, this study suggests that while national policies have been adopted alongside egalitarian ethos of a socialist state, they are deemed face-value remedies with little real effect to address increasing educational gaps among ethnic groups.

As system-level ideological change appears not to take place in sync with socio-economic transformations both in Vietnam and globally, insights from this study could have important implications for Vietnamese educational practitioners, including teachers, teacher educators and school leaders, where some level of change is possible. In fact, much literature has suggested that inclusive pedagogy should begin with teacher education and teacher professional development programs. For example, Cochran-Smith et al., (2016), and Gale et al (2017) note that it is important that teacher education programs are designed in ways that enable future teachers to understand and engage in social justice and diversity. One way could be attracting more ethnic minority people into the teaching profession, especially at the higher levels of education. Currently, most ethnic minority teachers or teacher candidates in Vietnam are recruited to teach at the primary level; thus, more teachers from underprivileged backgrounds should be encouraged and supported to work in secondary education or higher (UN Women, 2017). In addition, (pre-service) teachers should be provided with opportunities to immerse themselves in spaces that help them recognize, respect, and engage with diversity. For example, focusing on Vietnamese student teachers of a TESOL program, Nguyen and Zeichner (2019) showed that by structuring community field experiences in the training program, teacher educators could assist in developing student teachers' belief about social justice teaching. Through discovering inequalities among families, geographical areas, and ethnic groups, teacher candidates learned about inequalities in their local communities and successfully employed social justice teaching in their classes. Therefore, innovative approaches working against the rigid curriculum and unfavorable environment such as community engagement, child-centered approach, or culturally responsive teaching would generate small yet practical changes through which teachers can transform their beliefs and practices in the struggle for greater equality (see Bui, 2014; Huynh,

2016; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2019). More importantly, when carefully included in teacher training/professional development programs, not only teachers but also teacher educators and school leaders, both Kinh and non-Kinh, will benefit as they need to critically examine their own positionings, the teaching profession, and the role of education in relation to equity and social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Gale et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2010).

In terms of educational policy making, several initiatives can be taken in order to bridge educational gaps related to structural inequalities in Vietnam. Particularly with regard to curriculum development and implementation, it is crucial to consider alternative practices to recognize and legitimate social differences and diversity. For example, in addressing diverse learning styles and needs of students, differentiated teaching should be applied more flexibly instead of rigidly focusing on ability tracking and streaming for their detrimental effects related to equity (see Chmielewski, 2014; Domina et al., 2017). As “a philosophy of teaching rooted in deep respect for students,” (within-class) differentiation requires educational practitioners be able to adapt and leverage student differences to help them thrive (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019, p. 1). While the idea of differentiation has been included and explicitly defined in the new national curriculum (see MOET, 2018), it seems to primarily focus on attempts to stream students into different academic tracks or vocational education. Therefore, having a proper understanding and application of curriculum differentiation is necessary; at the same time, schools and teachers should be empowered to infuse differentiation into their pedagogic work in a direction that embraces diversity.

Another related policy initiative would be the inclusion of multi-lingual or multicultural education in the curriculum. Nguyen and Hamid (2018), who studied bi-lingual identity, maintain that language diversity and cultural heterogeneity should be regarded as a resource rather than a threat to national identity and solidarity. In this regard, we would like to expand their idea, suggesting that cultural heterogeneity that cultivates multicultural identities should be integral to developing socially inclusive pedagogy, and thus, it is a key to transforming official discourses for social inclusion in Vietnam.

Conclusion

This study finds that most secondary school teachers (who are mostly Kinh) hold beliefs that minoritize students from non-dominant ethnic groups as incompetent in higher-order learning, and they enact curricular and pedagogical practices that teach basic knowledge, without the expectation that they can apply or think critically about what they are learning. This contrasts with how teachers engage students in majority Kinh classrooms, with higher expectations to achieve competencies of cooperation, problem solving and self-directed learning. These differential beliefs and teaching practices are further supported by societal discourses and aims of schooling that assimilate ethnic minorities into the Kinh majority; that seek to inculcate a nationalist unity; and that perpetuate class (and ethnic) divisions through the idea of an “educated” person.

This study contributes to the thin literature on minoritized students’ schooling in Vietnam by elucidating the implicit connection between teachers’ pedagogic work and the broader socio-political environment. Given that ethnic minority and indigenous people worldwide continue to be minoritized and marginalized in all walks of life, there is a critical need for recognizing and developing diverse knowledges including those of under-represented groups (Fraser, 1997; Connell, 2007; UNESCO, 2017). For years, Vietnamese government has expressed continuous commitment to improving ethnic minority people’s lives. But addressing long-held cultural misperceptions and legitimizing social differences and diversity should be considered as priorities for policy action to tackle persistent inequalities related to minoritized ethnic groups. Through the lens of socially inclusive pedagogy, the study offers implications especially for educational practitioners to become more cognizant of their role in transforming schooling and the social system. Transformation of ethnic differences is a critical challenge in Vietnam’s education system, one that is still a centralized system informed by state socialism where national policy is often adopted with little space for challenging or resisting dominant ideologies and practices. Yet, attempts to make real structural changes within such a context have been proved to be more effective when initiated and implemented at the local level rather than from the top-down (Gilley, 2014; Nguyen, 2017; also see discussions in Forde, 2009 and Gainsborough, 2017, who cited the ways in which the emergence of the market economy was primarily prompted by ‘bottom-up’ processes). Therefore, socially inclusive teaching suggests a

promising pathway for Vietnam's education reform through bottom-up efforts driven by educators' transformative pedagogic work./.

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