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Eliminating Inter-Ethnic Inequalities? Assessing Impacts of Education Policies on Ethnic Minority Children in Vietnam

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
The Author	ii
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature review: government policies in relation to ethnic minorities	2
3. Policy context	5
3.1 The construction of schools and improvement of school infrastructure	6
3.2 Scholarships and financial aid	6
3.3 The teaching and studying of ethnic minority languages	7
4. Results	8
4.1 Young Lives research sites: Lao Cai and Phu Yen	8
4.2 Findings from the Young Lives quantitative survey	9
Enrolment and drop-out rates	9
Pupils' achievements	11
4.3 Insights from a qualitative sub-study	13
Access to school	13
Scholarship and financial aid	14
The teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages	15
5. Discussion	16
5.1 Majority-minority gap	16
5.2 Inter-ethnic minority differentiation	18
5.3 Intra-ethnic minority differentiation	19
6. Conclusion	20
Bibliography and further reading	22

Abstract

Based on the Young Lives survey in 2006 and a qualitative research on 23 Kinh (the majority), Hmong and H'Roi children from the Young Lives sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen provinces in 2008, this paper discusses the mixed impact of the implementation of education policies aimed at ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The paper finds that, despite a conspicuous expansion in access to basic education for ethnic minority students, the majority-minority gap in educational achievement persists. Case studies suggest that an uneven allocation of resources partly accounts for the varying record of performance across regions, i.e., between lowlanders and highlanders, and between those who are the direct beneficiaries of socio-development aid and those who are not. Access to quality education by the ethnic minority students is further undermined by poor administration and some examples of corruption on the one hand, and the lack of parental and community participation and scrutiny on the other. Children's experiences in education and development programmes, presented in their own voices, mirror their place in the existing structure of inequality in the society. As intended beneficiaries, children are not only aware, but are also critical evaluators, of programmes run in their name. A full understanding of the sources of marginalisation in education therefore necessitates in-depth longitudinal studies of children's experiences of poverty in the context of local and national political economy. The paper ends with a call for a genuine effort of policymakers, local authorities and other stakeholders in education and development not only to listen to children's voices but also to incorporate their concerns and hopes to effect meaningful change.

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1. Introduction

All citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion, belief, gender, family origin, social status, and economic situation are equal in learning opportunity.

The state gives priority to and creates conditions for children of ethnic minority groups, families in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, beneficiaries of privilege policies, invalids, the disabled, and beneficiaries of other social policies to realise their rights and obligations to study.

Article 10, Vietnamese Education Law, 2005.

The above-quoted article from Vietnam's 2005 Education Law is the latest confirmation of the Vietnamese state's vision for its ethnic minorities. However, despite the government's continued efforts to improve the life of its 53 officially recognised ethnic minority groups, the latter constitute 45 per cent of Vietnam's poor and 59 per cent of the hungry while only representing 14.5 per cent of the population (World Bank 2009: 49).

Education is one of the important areas in which the government invests to reduce inequalities between ethnic groups. Yet despite a variety of education-related policies ranging from investment in school infrastructure and provision of financial aid, to education in ethnic minority language, pupils from ethnic minority groups remain under-represented at all levels across the country. And while the gap between the Kinh majority and minorities in education persists, there are also signs of differentiation *between* ethnic minority groups and *within* groups (World Bank 2009).

This paper examines the impact of education policies on inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic inequalities in schooling. It is based on the Young Lives 2006 survey of 2,960 5-year-old and 12-year-old children in the five provinces of Vietnam.¹ This is complemented by qualitative research conducted in 2008 on 23 Kinh (the majority), Hmong, and H'Roi children drawn from the Young Lives sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen provinces. Findings indicate that not only does inequality persist between children of majority and minority groups in access to quality education, but that differentiation among and within ethnic minorities seems to have increased. The paper contributes to existing studies on ethnic minority poverty and education by assessing the education policies in relation to children's perspectives and experiences. It also seeks to shed light on these differentiations through a comparison of the two study provinces and a discussion of factors affecting the implementation of education policies for ethnic minorities in different localities.

1 Young Lives is an innovative international longitudinal study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. It seeks to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being, and to inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty. To this end, the lives of 12,000 children growing up in four developing countries - Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru, and Vietnam - are tracked over 15 years (www.younglives.org.uk).

2. Literature review: government policies in relation to ethnic minorities

This section reviews a number of studies on the impact of government policies with regard to ethnic minorities in Asia, focusing on language and education policies in neighbouring countries to Vietnam such as China and Thailand.

Brown and Ganguly's edited volume offers a helpful starting point in examining the impact of government policies on ethnic relations in Asia and the Pacific (Brown and Ganguly 1997). Including case studies of 16 countries in Asia and the Pacific, the volume provides rich analysis of many areas of ethnic minority policies, ranging from political structures and institutions to policies concerning citizenship, minority rights, religion, language, education and economic development.

Language and education are two crucial areas of ethnic minority policies that have a long-term impact on the stability of ethnic relations in any country. Keyes shows that as early as the 1930s, Thai leaders instituted a state compulsory education programme steering students towards the state and the nation (Keyes 1997). In conjunction with policies in other areas and towards specific minority groups – such as the implementation of development programmes in the north and north-eastern regions, introduction of agriculture, crafts and tourism to the hill peoples, a relative tolerance towards the political diversity of Thai Malay and Muslims, and the co-option of the Chinese into Thai-ness - the promotion of Thai literacy and education lays a foundation for a Thai nationalism without causing harm to linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. On the contrary, other countries in this volume have experienced ethnic polarisation and violence fuelled by prolonged and misguided language and education policies. A full recognition of Tamil as a national language in 1977 appears too late after decades of exclusion of language and access to higher education for the Tamil. In the same vein, many ethnic minorities in Burma and China have become alienated as a consequence of the government's insistence on a national language (Brown and Ganguly 1997).

Postiglione examines at length the impact of state schooling on ethnic relations and the development of ethnic minorities in China (Postiglione 1999). From analyses of survey and policy materials as well as case studies of the Yi, Tai, Tibetan, and Monguor, this volume assesses the gap between policy and practice in education for ethnic minorities in China. Giving credit to the Chinese state's significant efforts in accommodating ethnic languages through bilingual programmes, studies in this volume point to mixed impacts across groups in various regions and with particular literacy histories (Stites 1999). The mixed impacts of bilingual programmes in particular and of state schooling for ethnic minorities in general are due in part to the contradictions in the Chinese state which combines a rhetoric of inter-ethnic equality with an evolutionist view of the cultural inferiority of ethnic minorities and the promotion of a national identity. For instance, for the Tai people in Sipsong Panna on the borders of Burma and Laos,

the patriotic message of national unity and equality of the nationalities transmitted through education is largely undermined by other aspects inherent in the Chinese state

education, which on [the] one hand preaches constitutional equality of the nationalities (*minzu*), and on the other hand, impresses on the Tai students immense feelings of cultural inferiority.

(Hansen 1999)

An important contribution of this volume is that it goes beyond the use of quantitative data in exploring the general situation, establishing patterns over time and making comparisons between groups. Its case studies are grounded in ethnographic materials that capture how ethnic minority communities adjust to state schooling and explain the place of the latter in ethnic minority culture. Hansen's anthropological study of the form and content of state education and its interaction with the cultural practice and identity of the Tai is of particular interest to this paper as it explains the low number of Tai with a Chinese higher education (Hansen 1999).

In Vietnam, a number of recent studies of socio-economic development and ethnic minorities have drawn attention to a persistent majority-minority gap as well as signs of differentiation among ethnic minorities. Using data from the 1998 Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS) and the 1999 population census, Baulch and others show that households of majority groups consisting of Kinh and Chinese enjoy substantially higher living standards, higher school enrolment, and better access to health services than their ethnic minority counterparts (Baulch et al. 2002). A further breakdown of ethnic groups by demography and geography reveals a significant socio-economic differentiation among the minorities. While those groups living in Northern Upland and the Khmer experienced reasonable growth in the late 1990s, those living in Central Highlands lagged behind. In terms of education, the net enrolment rate in primary school among Central Highlanders and the Dao and Hmong of Northern Upland was below 70 per cent, in comparison to 91 per cent for the whole country. The gap was still wider for enrolment in lower secondary school: 65 per cent for the Kinh and 52 per cent for all other groups, including 20 per cent for Central Highlanders, Dao and Hmong, and only 5 per cent for Hmong. Considering other factors such as degree of assimilation (measured by intermarriages) and religion, Baulch and others (2002) outline two paths to prosperity for ethnic minorities: one, taken by lowland groups such as the Tay, Nung, and Muong, is to assimilate economically and culturally; the other, pursued by the Khmer, Tai, and Dao, is to integrate economically but preserve cultural identity. As neither of the two models appeals to indigenous Central Highlanders and Hmong people, these groups cannot participate in national economic growth. The authors suggest that the differentiated experiences of economic development by ethnic minorities in Vietnam can only be addressed by a greater diversity in policy interventions (Baulch et al. 2002).

In its 2009 Country Social Analysis (CSA), the World Bank provides an excellent up-to-date inquiry into the political, economic, social and cultural issues concerning ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Using Vietnam Household and Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) and CSA data, the report highlighted the ethnic dimension of poverty (World Bank 2009). The poverty rate among ethnic minorities in 2006 was five times higher than that of the Kinh and the Chinese - they constituted close to 45 per cent of the poor and 59 per cent of the hungry, yet only represented 14.5 per cent of the population (World Bank 2009: 49). Significantly, this study identified key factors constituting differences between majority and minorities affecting livelihood outcomes: three sets of differences concerned assets, capacity and voice (self-confidence), and the factors included levels of education, mobility, access to financial services, productive lands, market access, and stereotyping and other cultural barriers (World Bank 2009).

In relation to education for ethnic minority pupils, the World Bank 2009 study discussed in detail the government's policies on bilingual education and boarding schools. Except internationally funded bilingual programmes, which were piloted in a number of provinces, and limited initiatives at the local level, ethnic minority languages were only taught as a subject but not used as a medium of instruction anywhere in the country. The study acknowledged the increase of boarding schools in mountainous regions in the early 21st century, which increased access to schooling by ethnic minority pupils (World Bank 2009). The report assessed education outcomes for ethnic minority pupils by analysing a host of indicators such as enrolment rates, drop-out rates, late enrolment rates, gender difference in enrolment rates, the role of school fees, pre-school access, school infrastructure, ethnic minority teacher training, teaching quality and methods, the role of parents, adult education and non-formal education, and the place of affirmative action in tertiary education. Policy effort in this area shows that the government accepts there is a problem and is concerned to reduce disparities between groups. However, the report concluded that the government's policies on education for ethnic minority pupils have not been able to close the gap between the majority and minorities. It also highlighted differences between different ethnic groups (World Bank 2009).

Most of the Vietnamese analyses of socio-economic issues, including education and the experiences of ethnic minorities, rely on VHLSS and population censuses that are household-centered. Very few surveys focus on children or youth, let alone education and schooling. In studies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods such as the CSA conducted by the World Bank mentioned above, the interviewees are mostly household heads (or parents), teachers, education administrators, or local officials. Even when children are interviewed, their views are rarely contained in the text written about them (World Bank 2009).

This paper extends existing studies of the education of ethnic minorities in Vietnam by incorporating children's views. Following Brown's framework for appraisal of policies concerning ethnic minorities, education-relation components of socio-economic development programmes (infrastructure and financial aid) and education-specific policies are assessed against whether they help secure political, economic and social justice for ethnic minority children. Of the two aspects against which Brown assesses education policies - access to quality education, and the form and content of education - this paper concerns the first, namely, whether children of ethnic minorities in Vietnam have the same access to quality education as their majority counterparts as the result of the implementation of socio-economic development policies and language programmes in their communities. An analysis of school enrolment and drop-out rates and data on pupils' performance in Young Lives 2006 survey as well as ethnographic case studies indicate that not only does inequality persist between children from majority and minority groups, but that differentiation between and within ethnic minorities seems to have increased.

A unique contribution of this paper is that it assesses the impacts of education policies through children's perspectives and experiences. The differentiation among ethnic minorities, which has been identified in existing studies, is demonstrated through children's own narratives: how it feels to be excluded from educational services ostensibly aimed at assisting children. The paper also seeks explanations for this differentiation through a comparison of ethnic demographic patterns and geography of two study provinces and policy-related factors affecting the implementation of education policies for ethnic minorities.

This paper also demonstrates the strengths of qualitative study in policy research. Narratives of children's experiences of schooling, or lack thereof, provide rich accounts of the impact of state education policies at the local and individual level. Moreover, qualitative materials also help shed light on sources of marginalisation that shape the persistent majority-minority gap as well as increased inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic differentiation among ethnic minority groups.

Before presenting research findings from Young Lives survey and ethnographic research in Lao Cai and Phu Yen, the paper provides an overview of education policies concerning the construction of new schools and improvement of school infrastructure, the teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages, and the provision of financial aid to ethnic minority pupils. The focus on these three areas of education policies in this paper is due to their relevance in the communities studied.

3. Policy context

The population in mountainous and ethnic minority areas has been the recipient of numerous state socio-economic programmes over the past two decades. These National Targeted Programmes aim at poverty alleviation, provision of clean water and improving the environment in rural areas, instituting family planning, fighting social evils² and enhancing cultures and education in the country. Each programme contains multiple projects funded by the state and various international donors, which are implemented by relevant ministries or equivalent bodies in renewable five-year blocks. Among these, the Programme for the Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas, known as Programme 135, is the most popular - not only because of its coverage but also because it eventually encompassed the most relevant components of other socio-economic programmes (Nguyen & Baulch 2007). Over time Programme 135 has extended from five initial components to include infrastructure, the development of communal centres,³ resettlement, production support, training of local officials, and provision for ethnic minority households in extreme difficulty. The programme expanded from 1,000 of the poorest communes in 2001 to 2,410 by 2005, covering 52 out of the 64 provinces in the country and 22 out of a total of 54 ethnic groups. The second phase (2006-2010) covered 1,799 communes in ethnic minority and border areas and another 301 coastal and island communes. Its total budget for all components was VND 8,420 billion (equivalent to USD 5 million).⁴

Socio-economic development programmes, including Programme 135, are characterised by their focus on location, household economic status, and ethnic minority membership. In the later sections of this paper, we will discuss whether support always meets the neediest and how, when this is not the case, the programmes can exacerbate inter- and intra-ethnic differentiations. However, it is important to note here that Programme 135 has brought about visible changes to the socio-economic landscape of the remote and mountainous countryside mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities, as described below.

2 'Social evils' is a phrase frequently used in policy documents and public media to refer to drug use, prostitution, gambling, women and children trafficking, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse.

3 Commune (xa) is an administrative unit in Vietnam. In rural and mountainous areas, at each commune there is a centre containing a cluster of buildings where administrative offices are located.

4 USD 1= VND 16,814 (as of 20 October 2008).

3.1 The construction of schools and improvement of school infrastructure

Two of the five initial targets of the first phase of Programme 135 (1998-2005) were the development of infrastructure and the construction of communal centres, including public buildings such as health clinics and schools. School projects (5,228) represented 32.3 per cent of the total of 16,184 projects (Nguyen and Baulch 2007). This clear focus of investment on schools helped to increase the number of pre-schools in the whole country by nearly 31 per cent between 2001 and 2008. Between 1996 and 2008, the number of primary, secondary and high schools increased by 32.5 per cent.

More schools have been constructed in mountainous areas where ethnic minorities live, which means that better school access is available to ethnic minority children. Notable growth occurred at the pre-school level where the number of pupils increased by almost 67 per cent during this same period. However, to what extent this contributes to improvements in the school readiness of ethnic minority children remains to be seen. The most impressive development is that the number of ethnic minority upper secondary pupils trebled over less than a decade. This expansion is due to the increased availability of local options as more and more schools at the commune and district levels started to offer semi-boarding, that is, boarding during the weekday only (the number of pupils attending these schools increased 20-fold from 2001 to 2005, Bui Thi Ngoc Diep 2008).

3.2 Scholarships and financial aid

In accordance with the 1991 Education Law, primary school pupils do not pay tuition fees. There are indeed a number of additional fees – known in different locations as ‘school contribution’, ‘school construction’, ‘school safety’, ‘school upkeep’, or ‘book rental’, etc. – charged by the individual school (World Bank 2009). Whether or not these school-based charges are waived or reduced for pupils from households with economic difficulty, including those from ethnic minorities, varies from one location to another. Fee exemptions notwithstanding, London notes that access to quality education is largely constrained by the ability of a household to pay for other costs such as food, transport, and so on (London 2006).

Depending on the socio-economic status of an ethnic minority pupil’s family, she or he will receive additional financial support from various sources (Table 1). As of July 2007, a child attending a semi-boarding school who lives in a Programme 135 village receives VND 140,000/month during term time. Each pre-school pupil under this scheme receives VND 70,000/ month. Those who do not live in Programme 135 communes but come from a poor household or commune with extreme difficulties receive a more modest allowance (VND 20,000/ month; see page 14 for details). Regardless of household or village status, ethnic minority pupils receive school supplies in the form of free textbooks and notebooks. Ethnic minority pupils in state boarding schools and colleges and universities continue to receive a scholarship equivalent to 80 per cent of the current minimum wage. In a survey of 162 schools by Ministry of Education and Training in 2006, scholarship-receiving pupils from ethnic minorities (10,884) represented 2 per cent of the total number of pupils (574,441).

Table 1. *Scholarship and financial aid for ethnic minority pupils*

	Monthly allowance per person	Notes and other benefits
Minimum wage	VND540,000	Effective from 01 January 2006
Poverty line	VND200,000	Effective 2005
Average monthly income	VND636,000	
Pupils who come from poor family and live in Programme 135 communes or communes with extreme difficulty		
Kindergarten	VND70,000	9 school months
Semi-boarding schools	VND140,000	9 school months; free school supplies such as text books and notebooks
Ethnic minority pupils in state boarding schools	VND432,000	or equivalent of 80 per cent of the minimum wage; free school supplies; full exemption from tuition and other fees.
Ethnic minority pupils in higher education	VND432,000	or equivalent of 80 per cent of the minimum wage; full exemption from tuition and other fees.

Source: MOET Department of Students and Pupils, GSO website

The target recipients of scholarship and financial aid vary from one state-funded development programme to another. Membership of an ethnic group does not guarantee a child's access to the aid. It also depends on where his or her family lives, whether they qualify, and whether they obtain proper documentation of their poor household status.

3.3 The teaching and studying of ethnic minority languages

As early as 1961, the first sets of written characters for Tay-Nung, Hmong, and Thai languages were approved for use in education and public media, followed by those of the Jrai, Banar and Sedang in 1981, Co Ho in 1983, Pa Co and Bru-Van Kieu in 1986. From 1955 to 1979, 10 different languages were taught in general education, mostly at primary level, and most of the initiatives were taken up by provinces. In 1980, seven languages were taught, the selection of which was based on the availability of a written script, as well as local resources such as teachers and textbooks.

The following 10 or 15 years saw a decline in ethnic minority language education in many provinces due to a shortage of resources. But from the mid-1990s onward, minority language education experienced an upsurge at the national level. In the school year 2007/8, Chinese, Hmong, Cham, Khmer, Ede, Banar, and Jrai languages were offered in 17 provinces and cities, covering 107,905 pupils. Over 1,400 primary school pupils from the two provinces of Yen Bai and Lao Cai studied Hmong between Grades 3 and 5. The scope of Hmong language education almost doubled from 730 pupils (10 schools) in 2005/6 to 1,402 pupils in 2007/8 (17 schools). The number of teachers, however, decreased by half, from 135 to 68. In 2008, there are only two teachers of Hmong language working with 69 pupils in three primary schools in the province. This reflects an unstable general trend: in 2007/8, the number of schools nationwide offering ethnic minority languages decreased by 11.4 per cent and pupil numbers declined by 14.2 per cent. For provinces with a multi-ethnic population, it is the provincial People's Committee that decides whether a minority language is provided according to the proportion of population who speak the language in question, and the availability of curriculum, textbooks and resources in that language.

For primary education, a number of minority languages using logographic or non-Latinised alphabetic systems such as Chinese, Cham, and Khmer are taught as a subject from Grades 1 to 5, whereas languages with Latinised letters such as Ede, Banar, Jrai and Hmong are taught from Grade 3 to prevent confusion with Vietnamese. In principle, where native teachers are available and given that the writing is Latinised, the local language is used as the language of instruction from Grade 1 through 3 while Vietnamese is taught as a subject. In practice, Gia Lai is the only province that experiments with Jrai-Viet bilingual education.

At the pre-school (*mau giao*, aged 5-6) level and where kindergarten (*nha tre*, aged 3-4) is not available, Vietnamese language is taught to ethnic minority children for two months before entering Grade 1, with an emphasis on speaking. Since 1998, the kindergarten curriculum has reserved some room for local content to facilitate school readiness.

In the school year 2007/8, curricula and textbooks for learning of Chinese, Hmong, Cham, Khmer, Ede, Banar, and Jrai languages were released by Ministry of Education and Training. These curricula had been tested since 1999, and revised and approved by the Ministry. A number of provinces design their own teaching manuals for secondary and high schools. Official textbooks for learning minority languages are updated on a rolling schedule.

The evaluation of minority language learning is done either regularly or periodically, and varies across provinces. Some provinces provide incentives such as bonus points for enrolment by ethnic minority pupils in upper levels of education. There were over 1,000 teachers of minority languages in the country in 2007/8, almost all of whom were native speakers and 66 per cent of them only teach the minority language. Teachers of minority languages are entitled to an extra 50 per cent of their current salary; the actual remuneration varies across provinces. Most of these teachers have not received formal training in language and pedagogy.

4. Results

Against this backdrop of national policies concerning school construction, provision of scholarship and aid, and the teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages, we now examine Young Lives 2006 survey data and qualitative materials from ethnographic research conducted in 2008. But before presenting the research findings, a description of the research sites is in order.

4.1 Young Lives research sites: Lao Cai and Phu Yen

It is important to note that the Young Lives sample is a panel study and is intentionally pro-poor, and so although it can be used to look at variations between groups, it is not necessarily representative of the picture for Vietnam as a whole.

Among the five provinces where Young Lives conducted its study, Lao Cai and Phu Yen are those with a significant percentage of ethnic minorities both in the province population and the Young Lives sample (see below). As one of the six northern provinces bordering China, Lao Cai shares a distinctive geographical and ethnic diversity. It is a poor province that ranks 55th among 64 provinces and cities in the country. The estimated average annual per capita income in 2007 was VND 2.3 million; 43 per cent of Lao Cai's households live below the national poverty line, and 95 per cent of these are ethnic minority households. Over 100 of Lao Cai's 164 communes are listed as beneficiaries of the second phase of Programme 135.

The Hmong are the second largest ethnic group, representing over 20 per cent of the provincial population, followed by the Tay (14 per cent), Yao (12 per cent), Thai (9 per cent) and others.

Phu Yen is located in the south-central coast of Vietnam, in the foothills of the Central Highlands. In contrast with Lao Cai, 95 per cent of Phu Yen's population are Kinh inhabiting narrow strips of lowland between descending hills. The remaining 5 per cent comprise minority groups such as the Ede (Rshade) and Cham H'roi, each representing 2 per cent of the province's population. Other groups include the Banar, Tay and Nung. With an average monthly per capita income of VND 523,000, Phu Yen stands approximately halfway (33rd of 64) in the province ranking. One-fifth of the households in the province are below the poverty line, 17 per cent of which belong to ethnic minorities. Twenty communes in the province benefit from Programme 135, and another 20 are identified as facing extreme hardship. In the three mountainous districts, the percentage of poor households ranges from 25 per cent to 75 per cent. The H'Roi is a local Cham group concentrated in three western districts.

At the end of 2007, Lao Cai had 23,735 pre-school pupils, 62,790 primary school pupils, 51,099 secondary school (Grades 6-9) pupils, and 18,674 high school (Grades 10-12) pupils. The gross enrolment rates for primary and secondary school were over 95 per cent. A total of 89,543 pupils (57.3 per cent) came from non-Kinh ethnic backgrounds. Lao Cai reported it achieved universal secondary education in 2007.

In the 2007/8 school year in Phu Yen, there were 29,215 pre-school, 80,270 primary (enrolment rate 97.5 per cent), 64,414 secondary, and 32,201 high school pupils. 11,802 pupils of all levels came from ethnic minority backgrounds (6.8 per cent).

Bao Ly commune, one of the two research sites in this qualitative sub-study, is located in Bac Ha, a mid-range district in terms of both geography and socio-economic development in Lao Cai, where the Hmong represent 46 per cent of the population. Nearly 30 per cent of the households in the commune have incomes below the national poverty line, almost all of them ethnic minorities. There are four kinds of schools - a kindergarten, two primary, one secondary and one high school - educating more than 11,000 pupils in 2008.

Ea Mua is one of the poorest communes of Son Hoa district in the western highlands of Phu Yen. Similar to Bao Ly, nearly 30 per cent of its households are poor. The Cham H'Roi people represent 34 per cent of the population, concentrated in two hamlets. In 2008 there were 1,100 pupils studying from pre-school to secondary school levels in the commune, one-third of whom were from ethnic minorities.

4.2 Findings from the Young Lives quantitative survey

In the second round of the Young Lives survey conducted in 2006, 14.3 per cent of 5-year-old children ($n=1,970$) and 12.8 per cent of 12-year-old children ($n=990$) came from ethnic minorities. The largest minority group is the Hmong, representing 5.6 per cent of the younger cohort and 4.2 per cent of the older cohort, followed by the Tay, Yao, and Nung. There are a total of 41 younger and 18 older H'Roi children who live exclusively in Phu Yen. The younger group of H'Roi represents 10.6 per cent of the Young Lives sample in this province and the older one represents 9.1 per cent.

Enrolment and drop-out rates

Young Lives data show a significant discrepancy in the enrolment rate between Kinh and minority groups, and among minorities. While nearly 91 per cent of Kinh children attended

pre-school at the time of the survey in 2006, only 76.5 per cent ethnic minority children did. Among the minorities living in the north, more lowlanders (90 per cent of Nung and 88.6 per cent Tay) attended pre-school than their uphill counterparts (63 per cent Hmong). The enrolment rate among the H'Roi is higher than that of the Hmong and above the average for the minorities (78 per cent) (Table 2).

A similar pattern is found for the older cohort: the enrolment rate for the Kinh is 13 percentage points higher than that of the minorities. Only 77 per cent of Hmong children and 72 per cent of the H'Roi are enrolled. It is worth noting that among the Hmong at this age, fewer girls (72 per cent) went to school than boys (81 per cent). The gender gap is even larger for the H'Roi: boys' enrolment exceeds girls' by 25 percentage points.

A closer look at the drop-out rate in the Young Lives sample reveals a wide majority-minority gap as ethnic minority pupils are 7.6 times more likely to drop-out than Kinh pupils. The drop-out rate is high among the Hmong (23 per cent), where more than a quarter of girls quit school, but is higher for the H'Roi (27.8 per cent). The gender difference is striking: less than one-fifth of H'Roi boys left school while more than 40 per cent of the girls did (Table 2). Another disturbing fact emerges from the statistics on drop-outs: in the school year 2007/8 in Phu Yen, while ethnic minorities represented only one-twentieth of the total general education pupils, they constituted nearly 20 per cent of the drop-outs. More strikingly, 85 per cent of the drop-outs at the primary school level are from minorities, and this increases to 91.8 per cent in the three poorest mountainous districts, which include Young Lives sites (Phu Yen Programme 135 Steering Board Report 2008).

Young Lives survey data and local statistics have confirmed an observation made in existing research, namely, that the gap between majority and minority groups in school enrolment and drop-out persists, and remains acute in some locations like Bao Ly and Ea Mua.

Table 2. *Enrolment and drop-out rates by ethnic group within the Young Lives sample in Lao Cai and Phu Yen*

		Enrolment				Drop-out	
		5-year-old		12-year-old		12-year-old	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Whole sample	Majority (Kinh)						
	Boys	892	91.5	483	98.1	9	1.9
	Girls	883	90	483	98.3	8	1.6
	Total	1735	91	966	98	17	1.7
	Minority						
	Total	213	76.5	106	85	16	12.9
Minority	Hmong in Lao Cai						
	Boys	38	64.4	17	81	4	19
	Girls	29	60	13	72	5	27.8
	Total	67	62.6	30	77	9	23
	H'Roi in Phu Yen						
	Boys	13	72	9	82	2	18.2
	Girls	9	82	4	57	3	42.9
	Total	32	78	13	72	5	27.8

Table 3. *Vietnamese literacy and maths competence within the Young Lives sample by ethnic group*

	Sentence reading in Vietnamese		Writing in Vietnamese without difficulty		Average maths score (scale of 10)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Whole sample						
Majority (Kinh)						
Boys	488	98.6	470	95	489	8.4
Girls	488	98.8	480	97	492	8.5
Total	976	98.7	950	96.1	981	8.4
Minority						
Boys	54	82.5	49	76	64	5.3
Girls	51	81	49	78	63	6
Total	105	81.7	98	77	127	5.7
Minority						
Hmong in Lao Cai						
Boys	12	57	13	57	21	3.5
Girls	10	50	12	55	20	3.6
Total	22	53.7	25	65	41	3.6
H'Roi in Phu Yen						
Boys	10	91	9	82	11	3.5
Girls	7	100	7	100	7	5.9
Total	17	94.4	16	89	18	4.4

Pupils' achievements

The majority-minority gap is further widened when it comes to the quality of teaching and learning; so is the gap among minority groups. Records of the competence of Young Lives children in literacy and maths attest to this observation and point to the role of language (Table 3). As the degree of exposure to spoken Vietnamese in daily life for the H'Roi children is much greater than that among the Hmong, over 90 per cent of the former can read and write in Vietnamese without difficulty, while this is the case for only around 50 per cent of the latter. A comparatively better command of Vietnamese helps the H'Roi pupils keep their math score slightly higher (4.44) than that of their Hmong counterparts (3.56), yet much lower than that of the Kinh (7.15).

School statistics available for Vietnamese and maths reveal more troubling signs. In 2007/8, the percentage of H'Roi pupils in Ea Mua primary school who excelled in these subjects decreased sharply as the grade progressed: from 10 per cent (seven pupils) for Grade 1 to 3 per cent for Grade 3 (one pupil) for Vietnamese (Figure 1a), and from 16 per cent (11 pupils) to under 4 per cent (two pupils) for maths (Figure 1b). The higher the grade a H'Roi pupil attends, the less likely it is that he or she will do well in these two major subjects.

Figure 1a Vietnamese achievement levels of ethnic minority pupils in Ea Mua Primary School 2007/8

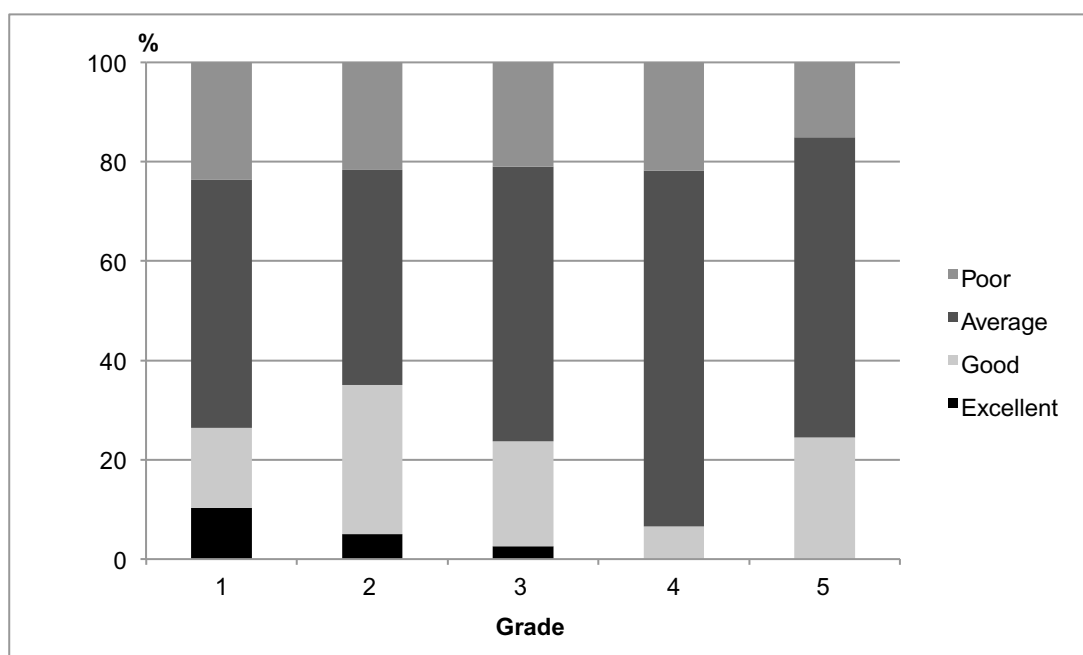
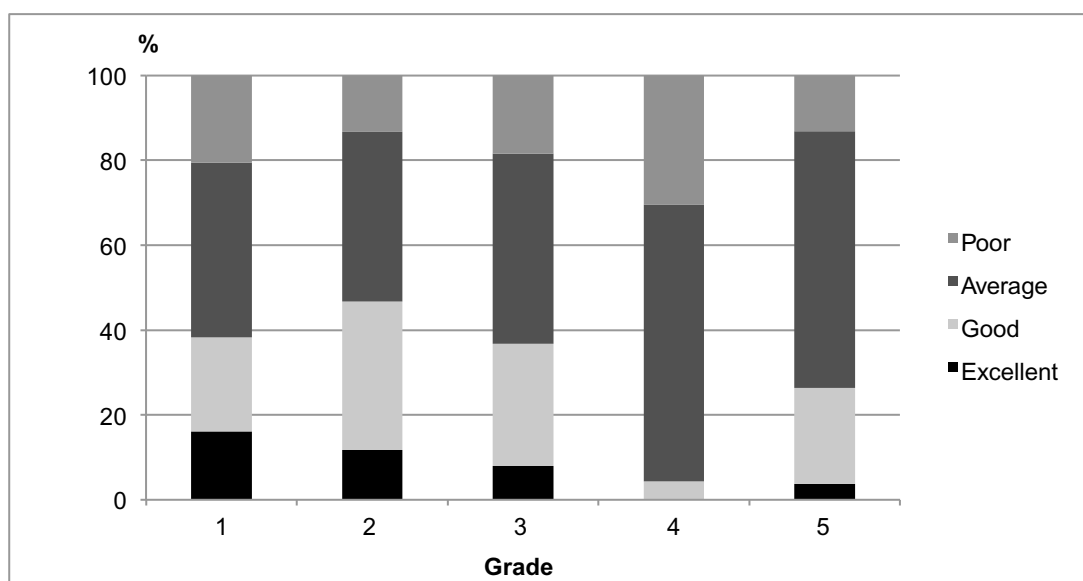


Figure 1b Numeracy achievement levels of ethnic minority pupils in Ea Mua Primary School 2007/8



Source: Ea Mua Primary School report 2007-2008

The above observations fit into the larger picture for Vietnam. In 2006/7, the percentage of poorly performing pupils in the mountainous and ethnic areas was nearly twice as high as the national average, and nine times higher than that in the cities and highly developed areas. A study of the quality of teaching and learning of ethnic minority pupils in northern provinces in Grades 1 to 3 suggests that there is a significant discrepancy between Kinh and minority

pupils in learning Vietnamese (Nguyen Thanh Thuy 2008). The study also finds a differentiated cognitive grasp of mathematics among minority pupils: the Application level is much lower than the Knowledge and Understanding levels in Bloom's pyramid. One reason affecting the mathematics outcomes is identified as language difficulty in verbal assignments (Nguyen Thanh Thuy 2008).

4.3 Insights from a qualitative sub-study

In October and November 2008, a team of five anthropologists conducted field research in Bao Ly and Ea Mua communes. The sample included 23 Kinh, Hmong and H'Roi children from both cohorts - 5-year-old and 12-year-old - drawn from the Young Lives quantitative sample. Each of the researchers stayed with the family of a sampled child for a week and participated in their daily life. Interviews and informal conversations were conducted with the children, their caregivers, grandparents, siblings and peers. In addition, researchers conducted a number of group activities such as story-telling, picture-drawing and story-telling according to the drawing. They also took leisurely walks with the sampled children and their peers in their neighbourhood.

The materials presented below are drawn from interviews and conversations as well as the group exercises. We found that children's descriptions of their experience of schooling provide rich accounts of the first-hand impact of state policies on the education of ethnic minorities. The following sections concern the children's views and experiences of access to school, scholarship and financial aid, and the teaching and learning of their mother tongue at school or otherwise. The stories that Young Lives children told us indicated that while they see some changes in infrastructure, improvements in financial aid and education programmes, many of them do not enjoy the benefits.

Access to school

Interview and picture elicitation materials collected in Bao Ly and Ea Mua suggest a complex picture of access to school by children from different ethnic groups and also among the same ethnic groups. While some pupils like the H'Roi in Ea Mua enjoy the benefit of a new satellite school in their village as well as improved roads to the main school at the commune's centre, some of the Hmong children in Bao Ly are less enthusiastic about going to the new school relocated on the riverside at the resettlement which their families do not want to join.

Three years ago, a Grade 1 to 3 satellite school and pre-school were built at the T-junction in Ea Mua. The new buildings had bright classrooms and were an upgrade of the former facility, a shabby hall that used to belong to the former cooperative. Today it takes at most 40 minutes for a child from the furthest point of the village to walk to the school. Phong, a primary and outreach teacher, commented that over the past three years, H'Roi first-graders from Ea Mua attained better school readiness thanks to the pre-school preparation available in their village.

For children attending Grade 4 or above, the road to the main schools at the commune centre has become a pleasant bike ride. Thirteen-year-old H'Lien and her cousin Nga took a walking tour to a white concrete bridge and wanted to have their picture taken sitting by a plaque saying 'A Construction Chosen by the People'. Nga recalled, 'Before [this bridge was constructed], my elder brother had to stay overnight at his friend's every time it rained hard and could only come home when the water level dropped. Nowadays we can go by bicycle to school and come back every day.'

In 'my village landscape', a drawing by Hmong primary pupils in Bao Ly, the school was painted in bright colours and placed at a prominent spot. Children talked at great length about the beauty of their new school. However, not all of them are happy about the school's move to the site down by the river as it is now further away for those whose families do not join the resettlement programme. The programme's purpose is to bring Hmong households from a high altitude to a lower one, more densely populated, the proximity to which served as the basis for the selection of the new school's location. Furthermore, households that take part in the programme are entitled to a range of material benefits.

The increased accessibility of schools as a result of the socio-economic development programmes does not guarantee school enrolment nor help sustain the attendance of ethnic minority pupils. So the majority-minority gap largely remains intact. Furthermore, as the examples of Lao Cai and Phu Yen Young Lives children presented below suggest, an unevenness in resource distribution across geographical regions seems to contribute to enlarging the gap among the minorities, namely between lowlanders and highlanders, and between those who are the direct beneficiaries of social aid and those who are not.

Scholarship and financial aid

From the 2005/6 school year onwards, H'Roi pupils in Ea Mua were exempted from the school construction contribution, which makes their schooling free. Pre-schoolers do pay a fee of VND 80,000/school year because the school is non-state. Also, the commune is not under Programme 135, its school-attending children do not receive financial support. Instead, subsidy comes in the form of textbooks and school supply through the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children project.⁵

Meanwhile, Hmong pupils in Bao Ly enjoy financial aid from a much wider range of sources. An allowance of VND 140,000/month is an instant incentive: as soon as the policy was announced for one remote uphill hamlet, one family sent three of its children to school, and another family sent two. A deputy headteacher describes how 'suddenly you have these six or seven kids descending from the mountain top [to go to school]! And they come from a village with the worst record [of school enrolment]'.

Seventeen-year-old Lan, a Hmong girl, spent four years in the Bac Ha district secondary boarding school, during which she received VND 280,000/month, although she remembers that:

We were not allowed to keep cash; the teachers kept it for us and paid for the food and stuffs. At the end of each year, the remaining funds were returned [to us] so we could bring home. I gave [it] to my parents. Last year I gave three hundred thousand *dong*. Sometimes I went to the marketplace but did not buy anything. My parents did not have to give me extra [money], except when I went to Sa Pa with my class on an excursion, they gave few tens [thousands] for spending money.

A wide range of subsidy options also means discrepancies among recipients who are in the same classroom or who board together. A pupil's allowance depends on their location and the socio-economic status of his or her family. As pupils come from different villages with different

5 This MOET project ran from 2003 through 2009, aiming at improving school access and quality of teaching and learning of primary school pupils in areas with extreme difficulty covering 40 provinces. The total funding was USD 250 million including loans from the World Bank (USD 138 million) and aid from Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway and Australia. Source: <http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=1.33&view=1726>, accessed 16 June 2011.

statuses, the discrepancy is clearly felt among classmates. One primary school headmistress pointed out the gap between VND 20,000/month- and VND 140,000/month- receiving pupils and described her school's strategy: 'You've got to eat according to the lowest allowance, however poor the food is. You take the difference home and give it to your parents. Those who do not have [money to take home] can never see it, but they know it's there.' These discrepancies may create discontent among the recipients or their parents because those at the lower end may think they would be qualified for a larger subsidy. As pupils board together they are aware of the differences. The extra money from the scholarship is returned to the entitled pupils at the end of each month or term when they visit home.

Not all children who are entitled to this aid receive it:

My youngest sister goes to kindergarten but she does not receive the seventy thousand *dong* they are talking about. [...] I know why: it's because my father was not there when the list-maker came; only he can sign. Sometimes they don't even bother to climb up [to reach us]. As long as we live up here we're always late in this kind of registration, or somehow miss it (14-year-old Hmong girl).

There are clear differences between the H'Roi in Phu Yen and the Hmong in Lao Cai in their access to public resources for education. For the H'Roi, it is limited to school fee exemption, while their Hmong counterparts benefit from a much wider range of incentives. Among the Hmong pupils, however, there is beginning to be some discrepancies between households that qualify for subsidies and those that do not. A more detailed discussion of the sources of this differentiation is presented at the end of this section.

The teaching and learning of ethnic minority languages

Hmong and H'Roi children from the same cohort in two provinces also differ significantly in their ability to speak Vietnamese. The availability of language aid for primary school pupils in particular, and generally, also differs between two locations. This in turn depends on the particular ways in which each local authority and school administration make use of the funding resources available to them through the state development programme.

Virtually all teenagers in Ea Mua converse in Vietnamese without difficulty. So do young Hmong men in Bao Ly, but not women. There are only three young women who can communicate in Vietnamese in Na Pang village, all of whom completed secondary or high school. As the village school has always been exclusively Hmong, Hmong is the language of interaction among pupils both inside and outside the classrooms. Girls who do not pursue further education eventually retreat to their mother tongue in their daily life far from the Vietnamese-speaking world. It can be assumed that not being able to speak Vietnamese may prevent them from having access to a number of socio-economic development programmes such as credit, family planning, and agricultural extension, besides daily communication in the marketplaces.

While Hmong language is taught in three primary schools in Lao Cai and an experimental bilingual programme is executed in another 18 primary schools (yet Bao Mua school is not included), none of the indigenous languages is taught in schools in Phu Yen. However, a native teacher started in Ea Mua pre-school three years ago; and four natives were hired as teaching assistants for first-grade teachers under a recruitment programme for schools in areas of extreme difficulty.⁶ Some primary school teachers in each of these localities make a

6 See note 6.

genuine effort to learn and use the native language in interaction with their pupils. The result is mixed, as the ability to communicate in Vietnamese depends on other factors, among which are gender difference in frequency of contact with Kinh people,⁷ geographical proximity between the ethnic community and the commune's centre, and the prevalence of popular media or its alternative in the locality.

In Ea Mua, some female school drop-outs we talked to could not read or write, but some could read thanks to watching TV. When asked about the usefulness of literacy, a 15-year-old girl cheerfully said: 'Of course it'd be wonderful to know how to read and write, I'd love to! I'd like to read well so ... [giggle] I can karaoke with friends.'

The most salient feature of popular media in Bao Ly is that it is available in Hmong language through CDs and DVDs imported from China and Laos. Hmong children and youths, and apparently adults, watch movies, serial sit-coms, and music performed by their ethnic counterparts living on the other side of the border. Karaoke texts are in the Hmong Latinised characters that are similar to those in the book of Bible. 'They look similar to..., perhaps, English, I think,' one Hmong girl said. 'I've seen letters like those in, um, [lowering voice] the Bible my uncle always hides away so I can recognise them easily. Watching TV [makes me]..., well, I can't read [Vietnamese], but I can karaoke [in Hmong].'

The current development of Hmong language education in Lao Cai appears inadequate to meet this call for alternative ways of improving literacy for the Hmong youth. The H'Roi are, on the other hand, too few in number to justify a language programme for them. While the local government cites the shortage of teachers and resources to provide local language programmes as a reason not to provide them, none of the alternative means such as media in H'Roi language are available in the locality.

5. Discussion

Findings from the Young Lives 2006 quantitative survey and qualitative sub-study as presented above indicate that, despite a conspicuous expansion in access to basic education for ethnic minority pupils, the majority-minority gap in educational achievement remains. Furthermore, there are signs of wide inequality between and within minority groups. In this section, I will try to tease out some explanations for these inequalities by looking for sources of marginalisation not only in external factors such as ethnic demography and geography but also in the policy design itself, as well as in different ethnic groups' knowledge of each other and of inequalities reproduced by members of the different groups.

5.1 Majority-minority gap

Young Lives survey data confirms a strong ethnic dimension to school enrolment and drop-out rate in the study provinces. This trend is also observed in provinces in the World Bank SCA survey (World Bank 2009). What we found in the qualitative sample of 12 older cohort and 11 younger cohort children adds individual details to this picture. All eight Kinh from both

⁷ Traditionally Hmong men tend to commute more often to the marketplaces and are thus more fluent in Vietnamese language than women. This gender difference in ability to communicate in the national language has shifted recently due to increased participation of women in commercial activities, especially tourism-related retail and guide services. This is not the case of Bao Ly where tourism-related services, i.e., transportation, is predominantly done by men (Truong 2011b).

age ranges currently attend school, while only eight (two older boys, three younger girls and three younger boys) out of 15 Hmong and H'roi children do. None of the older Hmong or H'roi girls made it to secondary school: three of them cannot read and could barely write their name, but one completed the outreach programme compulsory for her age.⁸ A 6-year-old H'roi boy and a Hmong boy did not enrol in Grade 1 in 2008.

When asked why they left school, the most common answer was family hardship. H'Mai in Ea Mua said, 'My family is so poor, I must stay home to help my parents'. Some girls explained further that their family needed a working hand, to tend the cattle, for instance, or simply to ease the burden of household chores: 'My elder sister was in the boarding school, two younger sisters started kindergarten and Grade 1, and my mom just had a baby. So I quit [school] to help out.' Apart from the need for domestic labour, boredom and underachievement at school was also expressed: 'I couldn't read, I couldn't count. I did terrible [in school], so bad that I did not care [to go on].' This aspect is most plainly stated by boys, but was also expressed by girls: 'I became so bored with learning. I studied, studied hard but it did not go in [inside my head]. It was no use to continue.'

Entrance to Grade 1 is not always guaranteed for all boys and girls in the villages. The eldest son of young parents, 6-year-old Tuan had to take care of two younger siblings. As his parents had to borrow fields from his maternal grandmother, the family often stayed overnight in a hut in the fields, far from home, and that, according to Tuan's father, kept him from going to school.

Nevertheless, poverty and shortage of labour may not be the only reasons hindering school enrolment. Y Dong from Ea Mua, for instance, cannot enrol in Grade 1 without a birth certificate. While this can be easily obtained at the commune's office, his mother seems reluctant to get one partly because Y Dong's father has left them. They now live with a man who fathers one of Y Dong's two half-siblings. The family lives in isolation in the village and Y Dong has no friends to play with. His story captures, in a nutshell, the marginality from which he suffers - one that encompasses poverty and social stigma in his own community.

Lack of a transparent monitoring mechanism and parental involvement only exacerbates these problems. Parents are only invited to attend two meetings a school year, mostly to be informed of the school policies and schedule. Parental active involvement in learning activities is not solicited. Complaints or grievance of classroom abuse and/or corruption are rarely compiled in writing and can only be heard in informal conversations. Some children even condone teachers' abuse; in Dieu's words, 'If we are stupid and unruly, it is right for the teachers to curse and beat us.' Others quietly disapprove but remain sceptical about a possibility for change: 'If we tell our parents [about the beating], what can they do? What do you think they can do?'

There is something more important in the often-heard complaints of ethnic minority parents about language issues at school. Conversations with them point to teachers' lack of knowledge of the local culture. For instance, a H'roi parent described this problem for his third-grade daughter as follows: 'Kieu is quite smart; she solves numeric calculations instantly. But when the teacher starts putting [maths] in words, something like "Lan has five nectarines..."', she gets confused. She did not know that a nectarine is similar to a peach, anyway.'

8 An outreach programme offered by a Commune's Committee of Outreach Education and taught by primary school teachers, aiming at school-aged children who no longer attend formal school. Other tasks of an outreach teacher include promoting school enrolment and/or return to school.

Finally, teachers' lack of knowledge of their pupils' cultural traditions reflects partly the selective preservation framework imbued by the Vietnamese state and partly the teachers' modernist thinking. A stereotypical observation claiming that Kinh pupils have a better ability to absorb teaching than their minority counterparts is common for teachers in both research sites (World Bank 2009). Moreover, teachers tend to attribute the poor performance of ethnic minority pupils to the lack of support from their parents and their poverty (see also Nguyen Hoai Chau 2009).

Teachers' appreciation of cultural differences is uneven. While teachers in Bao Ly seem to be relatively familiar with Hmong culture, their colleagues in Ea Mua cannot elaborate in detail what H'Roi local culture and customs involve. Teachers in both sites concur in describing local cultures as backward (Hansen 1999; World Bank 2009). The common misconceptions and stereotypes that local authorities, education administrators and teachers hold toward ethnic minority populations and children at school and beyond effectively keep the majority and minorities apart.

5.2 Inter-ethnic minority differentiation

The Young Lives qualitative sub-study shows significant variations in the experience of schooling among ethnic minority children. H'Roi pupils in Ea Mua do not enjoy a wide range of benefits available to their Hmong counterparts in Bao Ly. Even though Hmong is not yet taught in Bao Ly as a subject or used as a medium of instruction, given the availability of language programmes in the province and especially the interests of local leaders, we can speculate that the teaching of Hmong language in Bao Ly is only a matter of time. In contrast, any possibility of H'Roi language being used and/or taught in Ea Mua school is not in sight.

In order to shed light on these differences in ethnic minority children's access to quality education in Lao Cai and Phu Yen, one needs to look at the differences in scope and strength of policies concerning ethnic minorities in the two provinces, which in turn are shaped by the differences in ethnic demographic composition and geography. As summarised in the introduction to the research sites (section 4.1), Lao Cai is a multi-ethnic province where ethnic minorities make up 67 per cent of the total population. In contrast, ethnic minorities represent only 5 per cent of the total population in Phu Yen. Furthermore, overall Lao Cai is poorer than Phu Yen, with a poverty rate more than twice as high as that of the latter. A summary of comparisons between the two Young Lives sites set against the national context is presented in Table 4 (below).

Table 4. *Summary of comparisons between Young Lives research sites and nationally*

Site	Poverty rate	Proportion of communes in Programme 135	Population of ethnic minorities			Population of ethnic minorities studied by Young Lives	
			All groups	Hmong	Cham	Hmong	Cham
			%	%	%	%	%
Whole country	15	21.3	17	1	0.17	5	
Lao Cai province	43	69	67				
Bao Ly commune	28	partially		46			
Phu Yen province	20	22	5				10
Ea Mua commune	29	None	36		34		

Source: GSO website, Lao Cai, Phu Yen, Bao Ly and Ea Mua reports

The differences in ethnic composition and landscape of poverty between the two provinces translate into more development aid for Lao Cai; the H'Roi in Phu Yen are not sufficiently numerous to justify the provision of programmes that the Hmong receive in Lao Cai. Because of this targeting criteria, Phu Yen receives less support than Lao Cai. In particular, the number of communes covered by Programme 135 in Lao Cai is triple of that in Phu Yen; Bao Ly is a partial recipient of the programme aid, while Ea Mua is not.

Moreover, population size, geographic distribution pattern, and history of literacy of the Hmong and H'Roi may have contributed to the unevenness in the provision of financial support and language programmes that the children experience at school. The Hmong is the eighth largest ethnic group in the whole country, living in all 64 provinces. There is no exact and reliable estimation for H'Roi population as it is classified as a small local sub-group of the Cham concentrating at the foothill of the Central Highlands. The comparatively significant place of the Hmong in Vietnam's ethnic map, in conjunction with the prominence of Hmong culture and literacy in neighbouring countries like China, Laos, and Thailand as well as in diaspora communities, has earned the Hmong noticeable attention in language policy. The Hmong language and scripts were among the few that were approved to be taught in schools as early as 1961. It was also chosen as one of the ethnic minority languages for which textbooks and teaching materials were funded by international organisations in the 1990s. In contrast, the ambiguous status of the H'Roi seems detrimental to the preservation of their culture and language. Despite being grouped into the Cham by state ethnologists, the H'Roi tend to identify their culture as being closer to that of the Central Highlanders than the Hindu- and/or Islam-influenced coastal Cham. In their daily life, H'Roi people find more in common with the culture of the Rhade of the highland. They do not have a H'Roi writing system.

5.3 Intra-ethnic minority differentiation

The final set of differentiation of policy and social research interest is what is experienced by children from the same ethnic groups and, in most cases, by those who live in the same neighbourhood. Because Bao Ly is located at a lower altitude compared with Hmong villages, and therefore is not in the target zone for a Vietnamese/Hmong bilingual programme, Hmong language is not offered in the commune's school.⁹ Moreover, not all Hmong children in Bao Ly enjoy the benefits of the new school that is relocated at the centre of the resettlement. For children whose parents were reluctant to join a resettlement programme, the way to school actually became longer and more difficult. Moreover, a family's choice to remain at a high altitude causes some children to be excluded from the scholarships or financial aid they are entitled to.

Having to teach a class in which there are some pupils who receive government subsidies while some do not creates considerable difficulty for teachers. While the school administrator and teachers may come up with a levelling mechanism – taking the lowest allowance as a norm for food rationing in Bao Ly primary school, for example - the discrepancies are hard to contain from children's and parents' eyes. Complaints from the Hmong whose village was mistakenly disqualified from the second phase of the Programme 135 shows some sign of discontent, albeit mild and uncoordinated, among the most vulnerable population.

9 For the relation between altitude and distribution of ethnic groups in Lao Cai, see Roche and Michaud 2000..

6. Conclusion

The numerous education-related projects and development programmes have improved access to school for ethnic minority children, along with an increase in funding for teaching facilities as well as individual aid, availability of native language programmes, and opportunities to pursue higher education.

Nevertheless, in-depth surveys and qualitative research show that gaps remain in educational attainment not only *between* majority and minority pupils, but *among* minority groups as well. Factors that explain this include poverty and the demand it places on household labour, comprehension of language and the language of tuition and inadequate attention towards ethnic minority culture. Evidence in this research attests that stereotypes and misconceptions on the part of teachers, local officials and policymakers towards minority students and populations, and the negative views the latter may have of themselves directly hinder efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

School achievement varies between those who are direct beneficiaries of socio-economic and language education programmes and those who are not. The H'Roi students in Ea Mua, as shown in this research, often do not benefit from a wide range of financial support and have no access to a bilingual programme due not only to their location or socio-economic status but also, and most importantly, to the fact that they are not officially recognised as an ethnic group. Even within an ethnic group like the Hmong in Bao Ly, families located in the target areas for policies benefit more, while families living in the same eligible location but who refuse to take part in a resettlement programme are excluded from material benefits. Case studies from Lao Cai and Phu Yen presented in this paper suggest that an uneven allocation of resources partly accounts for the inter- and intra-ethnic variations in educational achievement. However, the demographic composition and geographic location of ethnic groups are not irreversible constants; they change. Over the past decade, the Vietnamese government has adjusted the targeting mechanism of socio-development programmes, shifting from an exclusively location-based criterion to a combination of targeting criteria including geography, demography, ethnic membership and economic status. Despite this widening net, the most vulnerable and needy are often the hardest to catch. Since the most marginalised end up where they are through a process specific to each community, there should be room in the policymaking and implementation process where this group is identified through local participation and the incorporation of local views.

Just as the children's experiences of schooling are diverse, so are the experiences of development of ethnic minority groups. The sources of marginalisation faced by each group touch and interact with income inequality, administrative problems, and the burden of geography, among other aspects; and they mesh with the local political economy to produce vastly different outcomes. Because there cannot be a uniform, seamless policy towards ethnic minorities, only with greater leeway for decentralised, local authorities to innovate and adapt, can there be diversity in effective policy approaches to the education of ethnic minorities. Further, the effectiveness of such a diversified policy catered to local specific conditions can only be guaranteed if stereotypes and misconceptions on the part of policymakers and implementers are tackled. This again can only be done through the increased participation of local populations and the inclusion of local voices in the policymaking process.

As intended beneficiaries, children are not only aware, but are also critical evaluators, of programmes run in their name. An effort to understand their views and the sources of their discontent would go a long way to redressing some of the implementation challenges. This is where qualitative research adds its greatest value to policy debates. Longitudinal studies that catalogue children's experience and their state of poverty and marginalisation need to be combined with other quantifiable metrics of progress; together they can help make the messages compelling enough for policymakers and other stakeholders to act to affect real change. It is in this that Young Lives has a significant contribution to make to the debate.

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