

Social Policy in Education in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas after 40 Years of Vietnam's Renovation: Successful Lessons and a Vision for a New Era

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Abstract: Education and training play a huge role in social development, contributing to improving people's knowledge, shaping personality, creating a new system of social values in each country and nation in the process of development and integration. In recent decades, Vietnam has successfully implemented social policies in education in mountainous ethnic minority areas. However, new limitations and challenges in education in mountainous ethnic minority areas are arising in the new context. The research question is what successes and limitations Vietnam has had in implementing social policies in developing education in mountainous ethnic minority areas. Based on secondary sources, with the policy overview method, the article explores scholarship support policies; tuition exemptions; social subsidies; priority admission policies to universities and colleges; gender equality policies... Analyzes successes, limitations and proposes policy implications to improve and enhance the effectiveness of social policies in education for ethnic minority mountainous areas in Vietnam in the new era, the era of national development.

Keywords: social policy in educational, mountainous ethnic minority areas, innovation.

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1. Introduction

Education and training play a crucial role in social development, contributing to improving the intellectual standards of the population, shaping personality, and creating new social value systems in every nation and ethnic community during the process of development and integration. In Vietnam, since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Communist Party of Vietnam and President Hồ Chí Minh have attached great importance to education. President Ho Chi Minh once emphasized: "An illiterate nation is a weak nation. Therefore, I propose to launch a campaign to eradicate illiteracy" (Ho Chi Minh, 2011:7).

The Resolution of the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam marked the beginning of the country's renovation in the field of education, with the viewpoint: "Education aims to shape and comprehensively develop the socialist personality of the younger

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generation, training a skilled workforce with synchronized occupational structures, aligned with the requirements of labor division in society” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1987:89).

In particular, at the 7th National Congress, the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted the Platform for National Construction during the transitional period to socialism, identifying: “Education and training, science and technology must be considered top national policies”.

By the 12th National Congress, the Party reaffirmed: “Education is the top national policy. The development of education and training aims to improve the intellectual standards of the population, train human resources, and nurture talents”.

The education process should shift strongly from primarily imparting knowledge to developing learners’ comprehensive competencies and qualities; combining learning with practice, and linking theory with reality. Education and training development must be closely associated with the requirements of socio-economic development, national construction and defense, scientific and technological advancement, human resource development, and labor market demands.” At the 13th National Congress (2021), the Party emphasized: “Continue to comprehensively and synchronously renovate the objectives, content, curriculum, methods, and approaches to education and training towards modernization and international integration, developing well-rounded individuals to meet the new requirements of socio-economic development, scientific and technological progress, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.” This serves as an important foundation and orientation for Vietnam’s education and training in general, and for ethnic minority areas in particular, especially in the context of deepening international integration and the expanding Fourth Industrial Revolution.

To concretize the Party’s viewpoints, the National Assembly and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have issued numerous policy documents to realize the guideline “Education is the top national policy” - such as the Education Law promulgated by the National Assembly in 2005 and the amended Education Law in 2010, issued in 2015; the Education Development Strategy 2011-2020 approved by the Prime Minister on June 13, 2012; the Vocational Education Development Strategy 2021-2030 with a vision to 2045; and particularly Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW dated November 4, 2013, of the 11th Party Central Committee on the fundamental and comprehensive renovation of education and training to meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization in a socialist-oriented market economy and international integration. This resolution once again emphasized the need to pay attention to and invest more in improving the quality of education in ethnic minority and mountainous areas: “Prioritize investment in education and training development in especially disadvantaged areas, ethnic minority areas, border regions, islands, remote and isolated areas, and for policy beneficiaries...”.

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 ethnic groups, of which the Kinh ethnic group accounts for the majority with 85.3% (82,085,729 people), while the remaining 53 ethnic minority groups account for 14.7% (14,123,255 people).

Although ethnic minorities make up a small proportion of the national population, they are considered the “frontiers and bulwarks” of the nation and hold an extremely important position and role in the process of national development and integration.

The ethnic minority communities often reside in highland and border areas, in communes, villages, hamlets, and settlements facing extreme difficulties. Transportation is inconvenient

due to steep terrain; in the rainy season, most villages are isolated from surrounding areas. Access to social services, including education, is always a pressing issue for local students in these areas. Education for students in ethnic minority and mountainous regions is thus one of the top concerns of local authorities.

Overall, Vietnam has successfully implemented educational policies in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. However, new limitations and challenges in education in mountainous ethnic minority areas are arising in the new context. The research question is what successes and limitations Vietnam has had in implementing social policies in developing education in mountainous ethnic minority areas. Based on secondary sources, with the policy overview method, the article explores scholarship support policies; tuition exemptions; social subsidies; priority admission policies to universities and colleges; gender equality policies... Analyzes successes, limitations and proposes policy implications to improve and enhance the effectiveness of social policies in education for ethnic minority mountainous areas in Vietnam in the new era, the era of national development.

2. Successes, Limitations, and Challenges of Education Policy for Students in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas

Education and training policy encompasses a wide range of components, including policies on facilities, equipment, curricula, teaching staff, and administrators. This paper focuses on social policies in education for students in ethnic minority and mountainous areas of Vietnam. Social policy is a set of activities of the state aimed at solving social problems arising in the development process, achieving equality, fairness, social progress and comprehensive human development. This research focuses on social policies in general education for students in mountainous ethnic minority areas.

These policies include scholarship support; tuition exemption and reduction; social allowances; preferential admission to universities and colleges; and gender equality policies.

Regarding the policies related to living expenses, accommodation, and daily necessities during study: Decision No. 82/2006/QĐ-TTg dated April 14, 2006, and Decision No. 152/2007/QĐ-TTg dated September 14, 2007, by the Prime Minister stipulate that students of boarding schools for ethnic minorities and pre-university schools are entitled to scholarships equivalent to 80% of the general minimum wage per student per month, for 12 months per year.

Decree No. 06/2018/NĐ-CP dated May 9, 2018, provides policies to support lunch meals for preschool children and policies for preschool teachers. Specifically, preschool children aged 3-5 attending preschools in border, high mountain, island communes, and areas with particularly difficult socio-economic conditions receive support equivalent to 10% of the base salary per child per month (for a 9-month school year) to maintain lunch meals at school.

Decree No. 116/2016/NĐ-CP dated July 18, 2016, stipulates support policies for students and schools in especially difficult communes and villages. Ethnic minority day-boarding students in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels who live too far from school to commute daily are entitled to food allowances (40% of the general minimum wage), housing allowances (10% of the general minimum wage), and 15 kg of rice per month per student.

Joint Circular No. 109/2009/TTLT/BTC-BGDĐT dated May 29, 2009, issued by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education and Training, provides that students of ethnic

minority boarding schools and pre-university schools also receive other support such as travel expenses during summer or Tet holidays, school supplies, utilities, and health insurance.

Decision No. 66/2013/QĐ-TTg dated November 11, 2013, stipulates support for study expenses equivalent to 60% of the general minimum wage for no more than 10 months per academic year for students from ethnic minority households classified as poor or near-poor according to state regulations, who pass the entrance exam to formal universities or colleges.

Regarding the tuition exemption and reduction policies: Decree No. 86/2015/NĐ-CP dated October 2, 2015, regulates tuition collection and management mechanisms for educational institutions in the national education system and tuition exemption and reduction policies, as well as support for study expenses from the 2015-2016 academic year to 2020-2021. Students of ethnic minority boarding schools, pre-university schools, and preparatory faculties; students of very small ethnic groups living in disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged areas; and 5-year-old preschool children in extremely difficult socio-economic areas, coastal communes, and islands are entitled to full tuition exemption.

Decree No. 145/2018/NĐ-CP dated October 16, 2018, amended and supplemented several provisions of Decree No. 86/2015/NĐ-CP. Under these provisions, preschool children and students of ethnic minorities in areas with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions are entitled to a 70% tuition reduction.

Regarding gender equality in education, gender equality in education is addressed in the National Action Plan on Education for All, emphasizing the assurance of girls' rights to education. Decision No. 4996/QĐ-BGDĐT outlined the general goal of narrowing gender disparities in opportunities for access, participation, and benefits in education and training, contributing to improving human resource quality, promoting sustainable national development, and fostering international integration.

Regarding social allowances and preferential admission policies, Decree No. 57/2017/NĐ-CP dated May 9, 2017, stipulates preferential admission and learning support policies for preschool children, particularly students of very small ethnic groups. Students from highland, remote, and extremely disadvantaged areas attending public institutions in formal, full-time programs are entitled to a monthly allowance of 140,000 VND.

The policy of “cử tuyển” (state-assigned admission quotas) into universities, colleges, and intermediate schools within the national education system is also implemented. Under this policy, assigned students receive a scholarship equivalent to 80% of the general minimum wage per month for 12 months a year and equipment and materials support equivalent to 50% of the general minimum wage throughout their study period.

In general, the policy system issued in recent times is a very important legal basis to support students in ethnic minority mountainous areas to have the opportunity to access the education system at all levels to improve their knowledge, educational level, and contribute to the practical development of local socio-economic. The implementation of the social policy system in education in ethnic minority areas has had a profound impact on the educational situation in localities, meeting the requirements of education and training development, and has been agreed and supported by the people. The education and training career in ethnic minority mountainous areas has had significant changes. In addition to the school system, classrooms are increasingly invested in and built to be more spacious, ensuring

adequate conditions to gradually improve the quality of teaching and learning. In particular, it enhances opportunities for ethnic minority students to access education. The evidence is that the rate of students going to school is increasing, and the number of students repeating grades and dropping out is decreasing. "In 2019, the rate of students going to school at the right age for primary school was 98%; middle school was 89.2%; high school was 68.3%. "The Red River Delta is the region with the highest literacy rate (98.9%) while the midlands and mountainous areas in the North (where there are many ethnic minority students) have the lowest literacy rate (89.9%) (Minh Dat, 2020) The education policy for ethnic minority children has been effective, mobilizing most school-age children, ethnic minority students to learn the common language, learn culture, and exchange and access information, science and technology (General Statistics Office, 2019). The rate of students graduating from junior high school and high school has increased significantly each year. The specialized education system (boarding schools for ethnic minorities, semi-boarding schools for ethnic minorities, and university preparatory schools) has increasingly shown positive results. The recruitment system has contributed significantly to the training of qualified ethnic minority cadres in the locality. The policies and regimes for ethnic minority learners have been implemented fully, promptly and in accordance with regulations. Thereby, it has encouraged teaching and learning, created equality in education, and contributed to the socio-economic development of the communities and localities of ethnic minorities in mountainous areas (Nguyen Duc Chien et al. 2016). Access to education has been improved, especially for ethnic minorities, "children of poor families, girls and disadvantaged groups are increasingly given attention. Gender equality in general and higher education has been basically achieved. Education in ethnic minority areas, remote and isolated areas continues to develop. A number of policies on tuition exemption and reduction, scholarships, student loans and other support for students under the policy have brought about practical results in implementing social justice and developing increasingly high-quality human resources." (Prime Minister, 2012)

However, the implementation of social policies in education for students in ethnic minority mountainous areas in recent times has still encountered some difficulties. In some localities, there is still a situation of ethnic minority students dropping out of school, the reason being the limited awareness of some parents about their children's education, and the lack of attention to creating conditions for children to go to school. The villages are far from the commune and district centers, so some students have not overcome their difficulties and have to drop out of school after finishing primary or secondary school. The economic conditions of the people are still difficult, most of them are poor or near-poor households; ethnic minority students are considered the main laborers, they have to work to support their families. Some customs and practices are still backward, affecting students' learning, such as: early marriage, incestuous marriage. This is the reason leading to the increase in the rate of disabled children in the community: the phenomenon of incestuous marriage has done. The rate of ethnic minorities with university and master's degrees is much lower than that of other ethnic groups; there are still 03 ethnic groups that have no university graduates (Mang, Brau, Ro Mam) (<https://moet.gov.vn>). Poor ethnic minority households still have limited access to educational services compared to poor households in general and the whole country. The situation of students in poor households with many children still dropping out of school to join the labor force, or getting married early leads to the problem of child marriage and human trafficking that continues to occur in ethnic minority areas (Nguyen Duc Chien et al. 2016).

The lack of facilities to ensure access to educational services for poor students still exists in ethnic minority areas. There is still a phenomenon of some ethnic minorities not being proficient

in reading and writing in the common language. Currently, there are about 14 provinces with a large ethnic minority population with a very high rate of illiterate people of working age such as Lai Chau, Ha Giang, Dien Bien, Son La, Bac Kan, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, Cao Bang, Ninh Thuan, Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, An Giang. This shows that eliminating illiteracy for adults in ethnic minority areas is a challenge for ethnic minorities (<https://hvd.edu.vn>). Social equity in education still faces many problems arising in the process of policy implementation. The quality of education and learning outcomes of ethnic minority students in mountainous and particularly disadvantaged areas still face many problems, are not consistent between localities and are lower than in the plains provinces (Department of Ethnic Education, 2016).

Education policies also promote equal access to education for all people, but gender equality still has many shortcomings. Educational opportunities for girls and women in remote, isolated and ethnic minority areas are still limited. The proportion of girls in mountainous provinces attending school is still low, in some places only about 10-15% (Ha Thi, 2020). Digital technology in education has been deployed to many educational activities nationwide, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lasting for 3 years from 2019-2022, but in many schools in mountainous ethnic minority areas, there are no conditions for deployment due to infrastructure, network connection lines, computers, especially students and students lack network connection equipment to participate in online learning (<https://www.vietnamplus.vn>). Limited infrastructure and digital technology equipment to support learning continues to be a problem for groups of students, especially poor ethnic minorities in remote areas.

The system of policies supporting scholarships, living expenses, tuition exemptions and reductions, gender equality, and preferential admission has achieved significant results, helping create a relatively comprehensive educational safety net for children, pupils, and students in disadvantaged areas. These policies cover many target groups, including preschool children, boarding and semi-boarding pupils, ethnic minority students, as well as students from remote and mountainous regions. The quantification of support levels in the form of cash or in-kind assistance-such as rice, meal allowances, housing support, or transportation allowances-has enhanced practicality and transparency, reducing the financial burden on learners and helping them stay in school, especially in areas with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions. In addition, gender equality policies and preferential admission mechanisms have contributed to narrowing gender gaps and expanding access to higher education for students from very small ethnic minority groups.

However, the policy system still exhibits several limitations. Support levels remain low compared to actual living and educational costs because most benefits are calculated as a percentage of the base salary, which increases slowly and does not reflect changes in market prices. Policies are dispersed across many documents and implemented in phases, leading to overlaps and difficulties for localities in applying them consistently, resulting in regional disparities. Some poor students living in areas no longer classified as “extremely difficult” but still facing real hardship are not fully covered. Moreover, administrative procedures for identifying and approving eligible beneficiaries remain complicated, causing delays in disbursement and errors during implementation, while monitoring and supervision remain inadequate. Gender equality policies, though integrated, are still mainly directional and lack specific interventions for ethnic minority girls-who face a higher risk of dropping out of school. Infrastructure such as boarding school kitchens, dormitories, and sanitation facilities remains degraded in many places, reducing the effectiveness of financial supports.

3. Discussion and Vision Orientation in the Era of National Rise

In the context of Vietnam implementing the policy of merging local administrative units, alongside deepening international integration and the ongoing transition toward a green economy, circular economy, and digital economy, intellectual capital has become the most important asset for fast and sustainable development. Local, national, regional, and ethnic economic, social, and cultural resources once based primarily on manual labor and rudimentary tools-are now increasingly being replaced by knowledge, science, and digital technology. For this reason, education and training have become crucial and increasingly decisive factors for personal transformation and national prosperity.

Looking back at the past four decades of development, it is clear that the Communist Party, the National Assembly, and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have issued numerous viewpoints, strategies, and policies on education, with special attention given to education in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. These policies aim to create opportunities for students in these regions to access education at all levels, raise intellectual standards, gradually close the educational gap between ethnic and regional groups, and improve scientific and technical knowledge to serve sustainable socio-economic development and ensure national defense and security.

The successes of social policy implementation over the past 40 years for ethnic minority and mountainous students are evident in scholarship support, tuition exemption and reduction, social allowances, preferential admission to universities and colleges, and gender equality initiatives. Importantly, these policies have achieved their objective of promoting equity and fairness in access to and use of educational services in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. The reality shows expanded access to schools for students in these areas, with high rates of on-time school enrollment and increased completion rates across education levels. Many localities have achieved universal primary education. Students, especially those from poor households, now have more opportunities to advance to higher levels of education, including vocational training, college, and university. Gender disparities in educational opportunities are narrowing across regions, especially for ethnic minority girls. Equally important, education policies are raising intellectual standards and academic qualifications, thereby contributing to the development of high-quality human resources with the knowledge needed to foster household economic growth and sustainable socio-economic development at the local level. These policies also play a vital role in implementing the Party's overarching goal of inclusive development-"leaving no one behind"-in the era of Vietnam's national rise.

Despite significant achievements, the reality shows that education policies for ethnic minority and mountainous students still face certain limitations and new challenges. These challenges relate to the scope of beneficiaries, the level of support, administrative procedures, learning quality, and the adaptability of policies to changing socio-economic conditions. New challenges in social policy implementation include disparities in economic and social development between mountainous areas and major cities, inadequate technology infrastructure and digital skills, and the impacts of climate change and unpredictable epidemics-all of which could significantly affect the execution of education policies and the realization of the Party and Government's vision for education development.

To further improve the effectiveness of social policies in education for ethnic minority and mountainous students in line with the socio-economic and cultural realities of each locality in Vietnam's era of national rise, the following comprehensive solutions are proposed:

1. Continue reviewing the current framework of social policies in education for ethnic minority areas to ensure their suitability to new local realities-especially given Vietnam's recent administrative restructuring from three levels (province, district, commune) to two levels (province and commune)-and in the context of ongoing international integration and the green, circular, and digital economy.
2. Continue assessing the effectiveness of education policies in ethnic minority and mountainous areas to avoid inequality in policy benefits and to prevent the creation of counterproductive trends-such as education focused on achievements, quotas, or formal qualifications without linking to practical needs and the real application of knowledge in local communities.
3. Further promote the role of all stakeholders-political parties, the state, and socio-political organizations-in implementing social policies in education. Clearly identify the strengths and limitations of the political system in supporting education development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas.
4. Encourage ethnic minority localities to better mobilize both internal and external resources to support education policies for students. Such resources should be effectively integrated into the educational process to enhance intellectual and academic standards, serving sustainable community development.
5. Families, clans, and villages should not remain passive recipients of social policies. Instead, they should generate initiatives and actively engage in receiving and benefiting from education policies to improve their relevance and effectiveness.
6. Each student and parent must raise awareness, actively seek out and utilize social policy benefits, and foster self-reliance, determination, and a passion for learning to escape poverty and contribute to family and community prosperity. Only in this way can individuals and families in ethnic minority and mountainous areas truly help realize the national aspiration for industrialization and modernization in Vietnam's era of national rise

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