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Constructing Social Cohesion in Vietnamese Public Schools: The Methods, and Students' Forgotten Identities

ABSTRACT

There are four main areas through which education can foster social cohesion, these are: curriculum design; an appropriate classroom climate of dialogue and respect; equal opportunities for all learners; and diverse school programmes that encompass the interests and experiences of the learning community. In this paper, by intersecting these concepts with the lead author's experiences as a student in Vietnam's primary and secondary public schools, we explore how social cohesion in constructed within the Vietnamese school system and the impact this has on student identity. Further focus is provided by analysing in-depth three fundamental aspects of the Vietnamese education system. These are: moral education; Vietnam's national rite of saluting the flag; and didactic, teacher-focused teaching. The latter section of the essay then critically evaluates some shortcomings associated with the teaching of social cohesion in Vietnam. The purpose of this paper is to add meaning to those cultural features of schooling that have been taken for granted by Vietnamese people and also to highlight the need to find a balance between social cohesion and individuality in the Vietnamese educational system, so that in future current flaws can be erased. This paper is a conceptual paper informed by research literature. However, it also embraces an auto-ethnographic approach and in doing so extends the parameters of academic writing within a Vietnamese context.

Keywords:

social cohesion, Vietnamese education, moral education, Confucianism, auto-ethnography, state schools

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PREAMBLE: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF THE LEAD AUTHOR

In keeping with auto-ethnographic traditions, this article opens with this preamble by the first author (Muncey, 2014). This project that this paper forms part of started as something with a very small scope: bullying between teachers and students, and between students and students in Vietnam. As a victim of bullying myself in all of my high school years in Vietnam, I was ostracized and silenced because of my difference, which, surprisingly, had nothing to do with misbehaviour nor bad academic performance. In fact, at that time, with the highest scores, I was racing for the 'Best Student' position in my class. However, it was my introverted personality that the lead teacher of the class and most of my classmates found problematic. They badmouthed about me, saying I was too arrogant and cold to socialize with them. The isolation and hatred rose even higher when the teacher herself explicitly refused to interact with me in class, while being caring towards others. This made them believe further that I, with my introversion and shyness, was supposed to be left out of every activity. This was also the case found in Walkerdine's (1989) research, which showed how quiet well-behaved girls' conformity and somewhat passivity earns them a lower status in their peers' hierarchy.

Therefore, I could not help but want to expose the reality of bullying in schools, especially the case of excluding those with an introverted character. However, as this project grew I took this as a chance to inquire deeper into the essence of this picture, tracing back the root of its cause in the foundation of social cohesion in schooling. This paper, in the end, hence covers a much larger scope than the starting point of personal experience and in this journey has led to the involvement of a collaborating author and the realization of an auto-ethnographic approach.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

This article is focused on how social cohesion is constructed within the Vietnamese school system and the impact it has on student identity. It is the first article from a larger research endeavour led by the two authors, one from Vietnam and one from England. It is a conceptual and reflective piece and as such also contributes to our understanding of the parameters of academic writing internationally but specifically within a Vietnamese context. It also provides the beginnings of a conceptual framework for further research and writing in this area. The issues of social cohesion and student identity are at present an unresearched

and still contentious area in Vietnam. This therefore necessitated writing that built a conceptual framework *via* reference to research literature but also reflection.

Social cohesion is such a multi-faceted, nuanced matter that attempting to frame it within a single definition is an impossible task. Originating from Émile Durkheim (1897), who stressed the importance of interdependence among members of any community for their shared solidarity and responsibilities, the concept of social cohesion in the twenty-first century has evolved in complexity. Enhancing social cohesion requires a comprehensive approach in that both difference and equality must be considered before united modern societies can be developed, given how diverse and multicultural societies are nowadays (Freire, 1997). The principle of unity in diversity, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping the essence of social cohesion in any context where it is to be applied.

On a large scale, social cohesion in the past two decades has been defined by the Council of Europe (2001) as "that [which] includes values and principles which aim to ensure that all citizens, without discrimination and on an equal footing, have access to fundamental social and economic rights" (p. 5). Putting it in an educational context, having social cohesion would enable all children to not only have access to education but also succeed academically (Lynch, 2000). Social cohesion is a potentially broader term that can also refer to the sense of solidarity when people work in a group or interact in their own community. However, in this article social cohesion focuses on the guarantee that no child is left behind.

This concept, when placed in the context of Vietnam, is a familiar one though the Western terminology may not be. A developing Asian country which has long upheld its collectivistic traditions built from Confucian heritage, Vietnam structures its culture based on the 'Five Cardinal Relations' (Wu Lun), which revolve around the hierarchy of ruler/subject, parent/child, older sibling/younger sibling, older friend/younger friend, and husband/wife (Katyal & King, 2011). Thus, from the lens of morality, a Vietnamese person often does not exist independently of others. The fact that one's identity can be so distinctly influenced by familial and social status highlights that Vietnamese communities are usually close-knit, which poses a great need for social cohesion. Reflective of the deep cultural roots of this, there are various idioms and proverbs about the necessity for social solidarity and the necessity of educating people about the reciprocal relationship between society and citizens. These most usually specify individuals' responsibilities towards the community and how they may benefit from it (Tran, 2016). Binding people together therefore helps create a sense of social cohesion.

The idea of community cohesion was an essential part of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front Committees' policy in 2006, advocating that all citizens' collaborate in building a strong cultural life in their local community. This emphasizes aspects such as interactions and opportunities for community engagement (*Uy ban…*, 2006). Successfully nurturing a sense of shared values and norms, however, cannot be achieved instantly. Rather than being like flipping a switch, the construction of social cohesion is a process that must start with education. That being said, it is regarded as vital that individuals have plenty of chances to familiarise themselves with and practise this concept throughout their years of schooling.

According to Heyneman (2002), there are four main areas through which education can foster social cohesion:

- Curriculum design: introducing pupils to the main social and legal principles of good citizenship;
- An appropriate, social-cohesion inducing school climate and school culture: reinforcing closeness between learners by teaching them the principles of dialogue and respect for others and appropriate behaviour towards one another regardless of differences;
- Equal opportunities for all learners;
- Diverse school programmes: encompassing the interests and objectives of the various groups that make up the community in mind, whilst at the same time securing the common ground of citizenship.

In this paper, however, we do not scrutinise how social cohesion is enhanced in Vietnamese schools solely based on these elements, although they are all valid and solid factors. Rather, adapting Heyneman's ideas *via* the lead author's experiences as a student in Vietnam's primary and secondary public schools, we have decided to base our analysis of such educational methods on these core and most conspicuous factors of schooling in Vietnam:

1. Moral education – analysis of a school subject,
2. Vietnam's national rite of saluting the flag;
3. The banking model of education (Freire, 1997) – the teacher-centred approach to learning at public schools.

On this basis, this article critically evaluates some shortcomings associated with the teaching of social cohesion in Vietnam, especially issues related to students'

identity. The purpose of this paper is to not only revitalise and add meaning to those cultural features of schooling that have been taken for granted by Vietnamese people but also to highlight the need to find a balance between social cohesion and individuality in the Vietnamese educational system, so that in future current flaws can be erased.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Auto-ethnography is a relative newcomer to the canon of methods used in education research. One purpose of this paper, beyond theory building regarding social cohesion in Vietnam, was to use auto-ethnography to create a model for how such a process can inform academic conversations, within contexts in which auto-ethnography is not yet widely accepted. Vietnam is an academic culture that usually emphasises positivism and objectivity and therefore this approach is particularly unfamiliar within this academic writing traditions in Vietnam. Auto-ethnographic research, to be defined accurately as such, must involve the use of: personal reflection which is then systematically analysed in order to enable the generation of culturally contextualised concepts and theories (Muncey, 2014). It is these successive stages that move such writing beyond reflection, a valuable approach in its own right and one aspect of auto-ethnography, to become fully realised auto-ethnography.

These stages within the construction of this article were realised as follows. The first stage of personal reflection began with the free writings of the first author. This created a template of reflections in the form of a series of extended prose paragraphs that were the first form of this article. These reflections could have been refined and published as a reflective piece in its own right, with a single author, but as such could not have been defined as auto-ethnography. The next stage of systemization, by which reflection was converted into auto-ethnography, involved two further processes. The first of these was linking this initial writing to research-based literature within the field of social cohesion, especially with Vietnam. This process of referencing back after a period of free-writing or discussion is based on a process designed by Cox and Underwood (2018). Following this, the second author, coming from a position of unfamiliarity and thereby able to read with the eyes of a stranger (Sinden-Carroll, 2018), interrogated the first author's writings *via* series of conversations based on a coaching model (Cox & Underwood, 2018). This coaching of writing also enabled the final stage of reaching judgments and theoretical conclusions.

THE CREATION OF SOCIAL COHESION *VIA* SCHOOLING IN VIETNAM

These following sections were written informed by the writing process described above. In all sections personal experience is informed by and interlinked with research-informed writing in this field.

The essence of social cohesion is to build a harmonious society with high levels of civic engagement and mutual trust (Green, Preston, & Janmaat, 2006). Therefore, the approaches that educators employ to foster a sense of social solidarity in Vietnamese students centre on this philosophy. However, this is also inevitably done with consideration for the inherent culture of Vietnam. Therefore, in the paragraphs below three methods whereby social cohesion is created in schools are analysed. All three of these are rooted in long-standing school traditions peculiar to Vietnam, and thus are relatable to any Vietnamese school student. These are: the teaching of moral education, the rite of saluting the flag, and the predominance of teacher-centred, didactic teaching.

MORAL EDUCATION
Given the irreplaceable role of Confucianism in modern Vietnamese life that co-exists with influences from the West, moral ideas in Vietnam are complicatedly mixed. Therefore, there is no longer one fixed set of people's ideals of what are defined as "good behaviours". Instead, nuanced ideals now compete depending on each individual's background, posing a great challenge for moral education in present-day Vietnamese schools. Indeed, the Vietnamese educational system is struggling to redefine the objectives as well as the moral content of this aspect of the curriculum in order to match the pace and complexity of its fast changing society (Doan, 2005). Yet, there still exist some core values that underpin the concept of morality in Vietnam and thus have been taught from generation to generation and still continue to be.

Moral education is such a focal area that it is taught as a subject at all levels within the education system. Students' moral education is split into two sections. Within primary schools, it focuses on developing character and on personality building. Once these children move on to secondary schools, the emphasis is shifted to more complex matters of citizenship education. At this stage of education the needs and responsibilities of being an upstanding socialist citizen are highlighted (Doan, 2005). In fact, instilling socialist thoughts and principles is considered important to the point that developing students' intellectual abilities is not prioritised, as constantly emphasised through this commonly said motto, of uncertain origin: "Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn" (social etiquettes precede knowledge

on the list of things to be learnt), that is written on the standard student notebook in Vietnam (Vietnam's Ministry of Education, 2020).

With that in mind, there are then two different "moral systems" that exist within Vietnamese society: traditional morality and socialist morality, with the former being instructed through informal channels (such as family and religious education) while the latter is typically transmitted through formal channels (i.e., the national curriculum and social activities/movements) (Doan, 2005). In short, traditional morality is typically linked and infused with virtues and values based on Confucianism, whereas socialist morality brings its focus on individuals' civic duties (Buetikofer, 2009).

One salient example of how moral education manifests itself in students' lives at school is the Pioneers organization. Found in just about every Vietnamese school, the Pioneers recruit the local youth to work alongside the local Communist Party representatives. Recruited from grades 1st through 4th, students are led towards the path of good morality *via* courses literally titled "Morality" (Rydstrøm, 2001). As the students begin to age, specifically through grades 5th through 9th, their morality is developed further through another course called "Upbringing of Citizens" (Rydstrøm, 2001). Those who join the Pioneers are encouraged to find themselves role models of good morals (often older students) who can guide them on their journey towards becoming better citizens. Once reaching the senior level of their primary schools, those with what are defined to be acceptable levels of intellectual capacity and moral standards are given the opportunity to become an official member of the organization (Rydstrøm, 2001). By giving students a platform to act on what they have learned about moral education in such meaningful and practical terms, the teaching of moral education in Vietnam has actualised social cohesion at the earliest stages of childhood.

The above matters are important to consider when trying to understand the means by which social cohesion is instilled within students in Vietnam. Firstly, traditional morals ensure a child is raised to become a functional citizen with the ability to participate and behave according to his or her social norms. This not only helps individuals to fit in but also reinforces society's sustainment of its stability and order. Secondly, by imposing mandatory courses on socialist morality, the system aims to raise students' awareness of their socio-economic rights and duties at an impressionable age so that these young citizens can continue to support the existent systems deemed "beneficial" to the country. In a way, giving every child access to moral education helps shape them into, what is defined as, good citizens, thus enabling them to thrive on an equal social footing with those around them. This moral teaching in Vietnam, therefore, constructs and strengthens the sense of social cohesion over time.

Further to this, and worthy of further investigation, though is the question of whether Vietnam is in fact a Confucianist society that functions on Confucianism. This is so firmly assumed that there is a complete lack of research or theory building that questions the reality of Confucianism in Vietnam. However, this insistence on not questioning the nature of the defining concept of Vietnamese culture may be one reason why individual identities are under-valued and unprotected.

VIETNAM'S NATIONAL RITE OF SALUTING THE FLAG

Another contributing factor to social cohesion that has long been implemented in Vietnamese schools is the national rite of saluting the flag, which occurs on Monday every week of the school year. This rite serves to consolidate social cohesion in many ways. In this article therefore this single act has been focused on as it is both exemplifying of wider approaches and a fundamental social process in its own right. Accompanying this there is usually a session called "Storytelling about Ho Chi Minh's moral life examples", one of the rite's main functions is to raise students' sense of responsibility to follow the ideology of Ho Chi Minh – the founder of the Communist-ruled Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 (Anh, 2020). From the perspective of the wider curriculum of moral education, this also offers a chance for students to reflect on their lifestyles compared to this role model. On a larger scale, singing the national anthem out loud during the flag salutation rite helps arouse patriotism and gratitude for the nation's forefathers. With vivid pictures painted in the national anthem, heroic history pages of the nation are revived. Immersed in this patriotic atmosphere, it is intended that the young feel the sacred meaning of the weekly flag ceremony with their national pride heightened in connection and unification to others as a collective whole (Anh, 2020). Thus as illustrated here the rite fuels the motivation and political spirit of the younger generation, inspiring them to contribute more to society.

Significantly: in the face of school closures due to the coronavirus outbreak, the rite of saluting the flag is still maintained, albeit at home. Mandated by the Department of Education and Training, at the beginning of the week, at 7 a.m. on the dot, students open the national flag on any screen of their available electric device and sing the national anthem (Thanh, 2020). According to the representative of the school board, the implementation of saluting the flag in such conditions and environment is to nurture students' respect for the country's tradition under all circumstances (Thanh, 2020). Overall though, the defining purpose of the rite of saluting the flag is to raise students' morality, patriotism, nationalist pride, and the spirit of serving the Fatherland and the people as well as preserving the cul-

tural identity of the Vietnamese nation. Thus its deepest function and purpose is instilling social cohesion into the mindset of students.

THE LONG-STANDING DIDACTIC MODEL OF EDUCATION IN VIETNAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Another significant vehicle for constructing social cohesion *via* education in Vietnam lies in the ingrained teacher-centred approach at public schools. Believing that teachers are more knowledgeable than students because of the aforementioned Wu Lun ideology, Confucian society therefore advocates schooling according to a banking model of education, as Freire (1970) termed it. In essence, this model places students in an inferior rank compared to the teacher. The teacher is: a figure to be revered and at times even feared, as it is only the teacher who can distribute knowledge to students as "a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In Vietnam, the saying of "Tôn sư trọng đạo" ('Honour the teacher and respect his teaching') is taught at kindergarten levels and thus becomes an unquestionable mindset that students must have, as well as a tradition to uphold. Therefore, in a way, this principle helps Vietnamese teachers control the classroom more easily than if they have a democratic atmosphere wherein students have more freedom to speak and behave in a way that may be deemed disruptive according to the Vietnamese standard.

This cultural feature, in fact, exists also because of the demography in Vietnam. With over 96 million people, around one-fourth of whom are students, some classes have in excess of 55 students. This is despite the Ministry of Education's regulated limit of up to 45 students per class (Vietnam's Ministry of Education, 2011). This overpopulation has led to the use of fixed rows as the typical seating arrangement in public schools (Yao & Collins, 2018), for other classroom architecture plans, such as the horseshoe or semicircular arrangement of seats, would seem unfeasible for such a large group of students (Koneya, 1976). Inadvertently, this seating map places most authority in the hands of the teacher as it keeps students on-task (Knight & Noyes, 1999) by directing students' attention to the board – the teacher's place.

Although Koneya, and Knight and Noyes' all wrote about this from the 1970s to the 1990s, their views are still very relevant to the schooling context in Vietnam. Their argument concurs with the experience of the first author. Teacher-student interaction rather than student-student interaction is encouraged by this seating arrangement, which primarily contributes to maintaining classroom order, for it lowers the possible disruption caused by too much discussion at the same

time. Thus this banking model of education, although being heavily condemned by many educators and especially Freire (1970), acts as an aid to the construction of social cohesion, for it exposes students to the disciplinary structure expected in Vietnamese society.

Overall, the construction of social cohesion is one of the main aims and achievements of schooling in Vietnam. Through this system of moral education, the national rite of saluting the flag, and the entrenched banking model of education, social cohesion is not only implanted but also consolidated over time. Gradually, these three separate features come to form a cohesive whole, which achieves social cohesion organically without students' awareness, and which thereby helps them behave according to expected social norms even outside and after school.

SHORTCOMINGS WHEN INSTILLING SOCIAL COHESION IN VIETNAM'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Advocacy of conformity to the social framework, however, does not exist without its shortcomings. In Vietnam, these drawbacks stem from those cases wherein students' individuality is suppressed or disregarded, which leads to three fundamental consequences which are analysed below. These are: (1) the lack of focus on identity formation in schooling, (2) the prevalence of bullying, and (3) the lack of programmes in public schools to accommodate students' differences.

THE CURRICULUM
The first aspect that highlights a lack of consideration for students' differences and creativity lies in the national curricula and methods of teaching. From the beginning of primary school, Vietnamese children have to study the following subjects: Mathematics, English, Reading and Writing, Sports, Crafting, Painting, Music, and Morals and Etiquette. Although this looks like a comprehensive curriculum, the problem comes in when these children have to learn by heart what cannot be forced into their brain. For instance, in music, they are required to memorise the notes so as to repeat verbatim what is in the book. Coming to the secondary stage, a rote memorisation style is imposed on students even further. In literature, free-style writing is a far-fetched task. Instead students must memorise and replicate sample essays and teachers' model ideas without fail (PNO, 2014).

Meanwhile, for scientific subjects such as Physics and Chemistry, students spend most of their time cramming formulas and such specifics as the periodic table instead of focusing on the practical purpose of science through conducting

experiments or inquiring into the nature of physical/chemical phenomena. The teaching of history is another example of how the emphasis on social cohesion in the curriculum negates the development of students' creativity and their intrinsic motivation to study. Rather than critical thinking or other useful skills, what Vietnamese students need to do is remember every exact detail of how many helicopters were destroyed in this battle, how many soldiers died in that battle and what are the relatives of that general, his biography, etc.

These brief curricula examples are to pinpoint the discouragement from critical creativity that results from an education system that focuses too much on constructing social cohesion and not on nurturing students' sense of individuality. In fact, schooling plays a critical role in identity formation because it exposes students to the materials that shape not only their world views but also their ways of defining who they are and are not, which, essentially, is their identity (Perry, 2002). Therefore, the little attention schooling pays to the development of the self through free thinking is a major hole that needs fixing in the Vietnamese education system.

THE CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP OF SUPPRESSED IDENTITIES AND BULLYING

Although the Ministry of Education and Training makes a huge effort in constructing social cohesion through schooling, the fact that they have overlooked the existence of differences in each student by forcing them to replicate knowledge without creativity has led to the thorny reality of bullying, which is explained below.

Defined as frequent and intentional acts of violence or hostility, school bullying often targets those students of lower status or power within the school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). That being said, school bullying stems from an imbalance of power between those involved. It is here that identity becomes a major element to consider. Referred to as the ability to influence or govern others' actions (Horton, 2011), power therefore functions on identity – the potential badge for distinguishing one's social rank from another. Hence, when identity crises take place, school bullying inevitably occurs, differentiating the bully from the bullied.

Lacking the educational input that would encourage the acceptance of people's differences, this schooling system has put Vietnamese students at a disadvantage as respect and tolerance for differences are not emphasised. This means that currently any factor that causes anyone to stand-out makes students vulnerable to being bullied. In fact, it is clear that student bullying has not been tackled very effectively, given how strong a feature of school culture it has been in recent years (Huynh, 2018). In reality, it has been shown that students that have: an exception-

ally good or bad academic performance; are perceived as too skinny or overweight by appearance, have exceptional height, or are too introverted or extroverted – are at risk of becoming victims of bullying (Huong, 2019). The forms of bullying vary from direct bullying, namely physical actions; to indirect bullying, or 'verbal bullying' (Horton, 2011). Besides, as Vietnam is a patriarchal society, gender-based violence at some schools can be high. When surveyed, 80% of the 3,000 students in Hanoi in 2014 admitted to having experienced school-related gender-based violence (psychological, physical, and sexual violence) (Plan International, 2020).

In short, unless Vietnamese schools create a culture of timely intervention measures to stop bullying in coordination with long-term educational methods to correct students' judgmental mindset, violence will continue to plague Vietnamese schools. This is despite the goal and perception that these schools are supposed to be fortresses of social cohesion instead of division and discrimination among their members. Constructing social cohesion without understanding what it is leads to surface level practices without deeper impact and also distorts the true meaning of social cohesion.

MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMES AND EDUCATION: A MISSING PIECE?

Another piece that Vietnam has left out of the social cohesion picture is concerning mental health treatment. According to UNICEF (2019), "mental health is not equated simply as the absence of mental disorder, but includes subjective well-being, self-efficiency, autonomy, competence, and realization of one's potential" (p. 10). In Vietnam, the most common types of children's mental health problems are "those of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, loneliness) and externalising problems (e.g., hyperactivity and attention deficit issues)" (UNICEF, 2019, p. 11).

In 2013, a study in the south of Vietnam conducted with over 1,100 students to assess anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation yielded alarming results. Symptoms of anxiety were reported by 22 percent of students, with 41 percent reporting symptoms of depression; whilst 26 percent of students had seriously considered suicide (Nguyen et al., 2013). Meanwhile, the majority of those surveyed (80 percent) felt that counselors should be more available for students, with half of those surveyed highlighting the need for teachers and parents to be supportive rather than punitive with their approach to the students' studies (Nguyen et al., 2013).

To further compound these issues, as students are not made aware of the cause or potential treatments for their ailments, they are pushed towards a cycle of despair and helplessness. A 2020 study on mental health literacy among students in Ho Chi Minh City found that no matter which symptoms or levels of disorder, help-seeking preferences were identical among students. These were

that they often sought the help of non-professionals. Mental health literacy was noticeably lower among those reporting depression (Thai, Vu, & Bui, 2020). Notwithstanding this problematic picture, mental health issues are often overlooked in schooling in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2013). Together with this very limited mental health awareness and the lack of treatment programmes at local schools (Do, 2019), according to a poll by UNICEF and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (Toan, 2019), 75 percent of young people in Vietnam did not know what helpline or service they could turn to when being cyberbullied.

Indeed, this lack of systematic structures of bullying prevention and mental health guidance is a great shortcoming in Vietnam and a significant obstacle to achieving social cohesion. There is currently significant risk that citizens, rather than contributing to the country, as intended, may just end up being patients needing treatment before anything else.

FINAL COMMENTS: INTERLINKING THESE DIFFERING FACTORS

Having analysed the pros and cons of social cohesion construction *via* schooling in Vietnam, this paper now attempts to link the discussed areas together to derive a meaningful thread. As has been identified, the sense of cohesion obtained through moral education taught at school, the national rite of saluting the flag performed every week, and the banking model of education practiced from year to year still lack intrinsic value. They do not, as of yet, promote a coherent whole based on empathy and understanding for the different identities of students.

As no two people are exactly the same, each human being exists with a unique identity. This leads to the matter of inclusion versus exclusion in society. Students are confronted by the fear of being an outcast, which, in turn, ironically yet damagingly, potentially causes self-isolation. Without effective communication, cohesion within groups becomes loose (Asseily, 2012). Therefore, teaching that raises students' awareness of equality and diversity needs to become the core foundation of the Vietnamese education system. Otherwise, the education system will both model and create an oppressive society in which whoever is stronger is the winner and without teaching the will to reconcile students' conflicts. Only by stressing the importance of solidarity with others on the basis of recognition and acceptance will education favour true social cohesion rather than suppressing those whose traits seem "outstanding". This is the underpinning concept that Vietnamese educators need to realise before attempting other practices and methods for achieving social cohesion.

The second implication to note lies in the impact of school architecture on didactic teaching and therefore on students' identity construction. Although seating in rows and the banking model of education help discipline students with classroom rules so that they can stay productively on-task with minimal misbehaviour, schooling should never be plagued by dominant practices and manifestations of power that marginalise the students' identities. A classroom should be a nurturing environment of security, belonging and meaning. From the beginning of puberty until about the age of 20, students are confronted with life-meaning quests (Erikson, 1950). Therefore, a classroom should be a space conducive to forming positive identities. This can only be achieved through the development of school traditions and teachings that maximise student potential and confidence (Agbenyega, 2008). Failure to construct this positive self-perception will confuse students with self-doubts and damage their self-esteem, in accordance with Erikson's 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' stage in his seminal identity development theory (Erikson, 1950). Therefore, the prerequisite for social cohesion in education is developing among students' a firm sense of identity and school belonging. Without these core elements, it would be almost impossible to harness a true sense of social cohesion, for it must be clear how one perceives oneself before knowing how one can contribute to the community. This then raises the question of how transmissive education can be changed to empower Vietnamese students with greater autonomy. We now try to suggest some ways to resolve this puzzle.

Rather than encouraging rote memorisation, which does not lend itself to real life applications, educators should provide meaningful opportunities for critical assessment and self-reflection in their curricula (Stanberry & Azria-Evans, 2001). This can be achieved through concrete ways such as posing questions like, "Who am I?" and "How do I see myself?", in class discussions (Freire, 1970, p. 84). This is viable to carry out as it is not resource dependent. Should Vietnamese teachers begin to adopt this technique, by compelling students to reflect deeply upon their self-comprehension, they will feel more integrated with the class materials. As an essence of classroom cultures is the identity of those constructing it, the major inhabitants of such space being students, it remains a great mistake not to positively include the scrutiny of students' identity in the big picture of social cohesion formation *via* schooling.

On this basis, students should have ample chances to deconstruct and form their own meaning of given texts in relation to their lives. Through this, they would be liberated to question and challenge any idea imposed upon them (Thomas, 2007), which would not only acquaint them with critical thinking but would also empower their identity, for students would now know that being different is not problematic at

all. This is very important in awakening students of their strengths, thus resolving the root of bullying. Realising their own power means fears of being bullied are greatly reduced, forming a more unified and cohesive society.

These ideals cannot be actualised without the help of teachers – "primary orchestrators of the classroom environment" (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010, p. 79). After all, it is through them that what and who we are is valued, within the school and hence by implication within the wider community. It is through teachers that behaviours are rewarded. By their daily involvement in students' lives within their purposefully constructed classroom environments, teachers influence and shape the character and identity of their students both directly and indirectly (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010).

Overall, social cohesion in Vietnam could be bettered with an emphasis on constructing a curriculum and a classroom environment that raises students' awareness of how they could empower themselves and others through their individualities. This could be achieved in concrete and realistic ways but requires a willingness to change the current systematic shortcomings of educators, policy makers, teachers, and even teacher candidates themselves. The nature of teaching in Vietnam is fundamental to the cultural problems of Vietnam today but teachers are also fundamental to the solution.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the formation and reinforcement of social cohesion, schools play an integral role. Be it through simple practices such as saluting the flag or structuring a curriculum that helps push for societal unity and conformity, every aspect of schooling in Vietnam aims to play some part in developing social cohesion. While these aspects might be effective in promoting social cohesion, such a system does not come without its drawbacks. The social cohesion practices currently implemented in schools not only discourage creativity in students but also may take away their critical thinking later as adults. Whether it is what they and the educators want or not, is a question that demands sharp critical thinking. Standing out in the picture of social cohesion instruction in Vietnam demands that one dares to exist with unique identities. Before this commonly happens, Vietnamese educators have to provide the ground from which diversity can thrive. Although it is not wrong to have the need of belonging (Maslow, 1943), finding a balance between social cohesion and individuality is crucial and needs immediate attention from all parties involved in schooling.

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