Is Education for all? The experiences of ethnic minority students and teachers in North-western Vietnam engaging with social entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges teachers and ethnic minority students face living in rural North-western Vietnam and how social entrepreneurship can mitigate these. The data was gathered through 33 interviews (teachers N=10; students N=20; parents of a student N=2; social entrepreneur N=1). The data were analysed using thematic analysis, drawing from Fraser's (2010) justice model. The paper also links to Granovetter's (1985;2005) social embeddedness concept, to emphasise how social enterprise enabled socio-economic networks can support ethnic minority students to overcome redistribution, representation and recognition problems. The paper makes an original contribution by showing how socio-economic networks enhance weak-ties and bridge resources to empower the socially disadvantaged to achieve educational inclusion.

1. Introduction:

Education has been an active area of development for Vietnam, in line with the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the country has been striving to ensure that all children receive the same quality of education (UNICEF, 2009). Quality of education has become one of the country's key education objectives and the government has sought to support disadvantaged students by providing free textbooks, abolishing primary school fees and trying to build more schools (Tran and Phan, 2014; Truong, 2011; Yasushi and Yuto, 2009; Young Lives, 2007). The importance of this focus has been further enhanced by the Vietnamese government's commitment to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals targeted at 2030, with SDG4: Quality of Education seeking to build upon the work of the MDGs (UN, 2020).

Despite ongoing initiatives to improve the quality of education, there are still issues within the rural education system, especially in the North-western part of the country. It is argued that inequality has been rising noticeably within the Vietnamese Education System, especially in terms of differences between rural and urban regions, and between ethnic minority groups and the major population (Gaiha and Thapa, 2006). Vietnam has a linguistically diverse ethnic minority. Yet the official language that is being taught in schools is Vietnamese. This causes ethnic minority students, who often live in rural areas, to have a far lower level of educational attainment compared to Vietnamese students (Luong and Nieke, 2013; Rew, 2009; Save the Children, 2009). Research has also identified that even though enrolment gaps between the ethnic majority group (known as Kinh[1]) and ethnic minority groups have narrowed at the primary education level since 1992, the ethnicity enrolment gap at lower and upper secondary educational levels has persisted (Education Development Trust,2013, p.9), with just 32.3% being enrolled at upper-secondary level (Phung et al., 2017).

[1] There are 54 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam that are officially listed. Ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), makes up a vast majority of the population; approximately 86 per cent, therefore making the other 53 ethnic groups to be the ethnic minorities (Quan, 2009).

One of the issues with ethnic minority students is that they often live in isolated; and rural places, which causes them to have lower living standards than the ethnic majority that live in urban areas (Cresswell and Underwood, 2004; Reeves, 2012; The World Bank Development Research Group, 2000; Williams, 2005). The existing literature on Vietnamese education (London, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2014; Pham and Fry, 2004; Tran, 2013) highlights the difficulties that ethnic minority students face, along with the different solutions that organisations like UNICEF, the World Bank and others adopt. Vietnam aims to improve both access to and quality of education to all, and a small number of NGOs and charities have been trying to support improving the quality of education, whilst the government has reduced/exempted tuition fees, loans and scholarships for disadvantaged students (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2015). Yet, there are still basic education limitations in rural areas of Vietnam, and there is not enough investment in education in rural areas (Duong, 2014). This raises questions as to the effectiveness of the above programmes in genuinely supporting ethnic minority families to access high quality education for their children and whether socially innovative and community-led models of provision could be more effective.

Social enterprises are self-sustainable, independent organisations that deliver economic, social and environmental outcomes, utilising the market to improve social mobility and reduce social exclusion/inequality (Dart, Clow and Armstrong, 2010; Nicholls, 2007); whilst pertinent to this study, social enterprise can also provide solutions to 'social' challenges in developing countries (Nicholls, 2013). Social enterprise in Vietnam is a relatively new concept, introduced into the country by international NGOs early in the new millennium (Trần, 2016) and building upon early social entrepreneurial models in the form of cooperatives that emerged in the country in the 1960's (Trương et al., 2015). This development is evidenced by the fact that 66% of the estimated 19,125 social enterprises in the country adopt cooperative legal forms; whilst 37% of social enterprises are female-led (British Council, 2019), a factor that is important to this paper (and explored later in the discussion section) in relation to the empowerment of females from ethnic minorities. Further, prior research has identified the important role that social enterprises can play in supporting Vietnam's ethnic minorities (Đặng and Phạm, 2013), as well as targeting educational inequality (UNDP, 2018). The Vietnamese social enterprise sector is receiving increasing support and interest from the state (including the introduction of a new social enterprise legal form) (Phan, 2015), and is also being recognised as providing an innovative new method for delivering community-led and culturally sensitive public service delivery (Cao Tu, 2019).

In this paper, we vocalise the experiences of teachers and students' living in North-western Vietnam and the different sets of challenges that they face. While identifying the teachers and students' needs we also seek to understand the extent of the role social enterprises have in supporting education in North-western Vietnam and empowering disadvantaged families. The paper is specifically concerned with the remote mountainous regions of North-western Vietnam where 50% of the ethnic minority population in the country reside (Phung et al., 2017). This article, while contributing to the body of scholarship on rural education and ethnicity, also makes a unique contribution to the social entrepreneurship literature. The framework that we develop posits that social enterprises, acting as socially embedded organisational actors (Granovetter, 1985; 2005), empower ethnic minority families by providing them with access to networks that redistribute *resources*, provide cultural *recognition* of the problems that they face, and give *representation* to their voices (Fraser, 2010). In doing so, such social enterprises are effectively acting as educational social innovators actively disrupting normative structures in the community (Heiskala, 2007; Mulgan, 2019) to remove or bypass barriers to education for ethnic minorities. The paper therefore makes an original contribution to knowledge by combining socio-economic network and educational justice theories, to propose innovative solutions to educational disadvantage.

2. Research Context: Rural Education in Vietnam

Challenges in rural education are not specific to Vietnam. Many countries such as Turkey, Australia, and the United States face difficulties in providing educational opportunities to students, as well as maintaining teachers in rural and remote places (Lunn, 1997; Yarrow et.al., 1999; Çiftçi & Cin, 2018). The term rural contains a variety of definitions and understandings, and there is not a definite classification of what the term rural constitutes. Yet in literature, it is widely accepted that rural areas are categorised as people lacking access to social life, health facilities, educational opportunities for children, as well as often facing the necessity to travel long distances in order to gain access to vital services (Yarrow et al., 1999; Author-A, 2020). Around the world, people who live in rural places often suffer from "uneven economic, social and educational development" (Çiftçi & Cin, 2018, p. 2). The case of Vietnam is no different from the experiences reported in these other countries. The majority of ethnic minorities in Vietnam live in rural and mountainous parts of the country and face a variety of challenges in accessing quality education. Indeed, whilst 64 percent of the country population reside in rural areas, they only contribute 18 percent to the country's total GDP (GSO, 2018). It was estimated that the proportion of ethnic minorities living in poverty has increased from just one fifth in 1993 to nearly one third in 2002, and nearly three quarters in 2018 (Nguyen et al., 2013; Pimhidzai et al., 2018). The majority of children who live in the mountainous regions need to walk approximately forty to fifty minutes to their schools from their houses or find a boarding facility near their schools (Chi, 2011). The Vietnamese government in 1998 created Programme 135 (P135), a policy initiative designed to improve the living standards of those who were identified as being the "most vulnerable" communities of ethnic minorities living in mountainous and remote regions of Vietnam. Moreover, recruiting teachers to work in these rural regions is a common problem among countries with a significant rural population. In Vietnam, teachers (whether they come from ethnic minority or majority backgrounds) are not often willing to take posts in rural areas, even though the government has introduced special allowances (said to be as much as an additional 30–50% of the salary). This reluctance is often due to the high cost of living in remote areas, when compared to cities, as the teachers' special allowances are often used for travel costs to access daily requirements (Hamano, 2008). The teachers working in rural regions also do not have opportunities to engage in second jobs, which are normally prevalent in the cities.

3. Importance of redistribution, recognition and representation in local communities.

This paper draws from Nancy Fraser's justice model (2010) and utilises her concepts of redistribution, recognition, and representation to highlight the socio-economic and cultural challenges that ethnic minority students in North-western Vietnam experience. While drawing from Fraser's three-dimensional justice model, the paper also links to Granovetter's (2005) social embeddedness concept to emphasise the importance of educational social entrepreneurship to seek to overcome the redistribution and recognition issues of ethnic minority students.

Fraser's justice model (2010) has three dimensions to framing inequality: *redistribution (economic)*, *recognitio*n (cultural) and *representation (participation)*. *Redistribution* refers to socio-economic injustice "which is rooted in the political-economic structure of the society" and includes examples of exploitation (one's labour being used for another's benefit); economic marginalisation (poorly paid work) and deprivation (not having adequate resources for a normal standard of living) (Fraser, 1997, p.13). In our case redistribution identifies economic challenges both the teachers and students

experience in North-western Vietnam and their lack of access to teaching and learning resources, which affects their access to quality education. *Recognition* conceptualises cultural or symbolic injustice rooted in social and cultural patterns of representation or non-representation; and the misrecognition of group identities. Cultural domination is one of the examples of this level of injustice (Fraser, 2010). Indeed, "Ethnicity, gender and race are all socially constructed group identities for which unequal social relations and status are often taken for granted" (Dejaeghere, Wu & Vu, 2013, p.121). In North-western Vietnam, this case equates to ethnic minorities who live, work and study in rural areas. This brings us to *representation, representation* aims at "countering demeaning cultural representations of subordinated groups" (Fraser, 2000). Marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, need better policies that involve and reflect their cultural and social practice and make their voices heard. Therefore, a key element of *representation* is empowerment or encouraging participation to increase collective power, which in itself is a key facet of social innovation (Mulgan, 2019) and therefore educational social enterprise. Fraser's work has been used in education to frame inequality and show how economic, political and cultural injustices are interrelated. Scholars such as Dejaeghere, Wu & Vu (2013), Çiftçi & Cin (2018) and Aikman (2011) employ Fraser's social justice framework to discuss the inequalities in different educational contexts including rural education.

Granovetter's (1985; 2005) work on social embeddedness identifies the key role of social networks in shaping social actions or social practices in an economic context. Social network theory broadly focuses on how an individual or group's position within socio-economic structures (in this case ethnic minorities), acts as a mediator of behaviour and limits or enables their access to resources (financial or otherwise), which ultimately shapes their ability to achieve goals (Brass, 1984; Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 2001). Granovetter (1985; 2005) builds upon this by focusing on group's 'strong' and 'weak' ties. Strong ties relate to close interpersonal relationships that are built upon trust; whilst weak ties represent one's acquaintances and informal social ties (Granovetter, 2005). In this respect strong and weak ties could be viewed as proxies of Putnam's (2001) 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital respectively, albeit with the focus being on socio-economic structures rather than purely social. Nevertheless, in Granovetter's (2005) model, the role of weak ties become critical for groups that are looking to solve problems that they are facing, which cannot be resolved by their strong ties. For ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, ineffective government policy, cultural and linguistic exclusion and a lack of financial resources means that they have to find alternative weak ties if they wish to access quality education; in Vietnam social enterprises are increasingly providing these ties.

This research seeks to identify the systemically repairing role that social enterprises can play as educational innovators in North-western Vietnam. Social enterprises by their very design are centred on reducing social inequality and solving state and market failures (Dart, Clow and Armstrong, 2010; Nicholls, 2013). In the Vietnamese context, social enterprise can help bridge the inequalities between rural and urban schools, by providing access to social networks and empowering ethnic minorities to access/develop Granovetter's (2005) weak nodes, which are essential to their empowerment. This emerges as social entrepreneurs are part of local structures and hence can develop resources and opportunities (Anderson, 2002). The social enterprise therefore, can help to support ethnic minorities to access resources, mitigating barriers experienced in relation to Fraser's (2010) concept of redistribution. Moreover, the social enterprise can also act as a disruptor of normative structures (Heiskala, 2007), by representing ethnic minority needs and working with them towards a common goal (i.e. receiving a better quality of education). The social enterprise may do this by lobbying government, seeking policy and funding changes, and also engaging with the marketplace to access resources and opportunities. This can empower students to participate further in education, enabling them to go on and achieve higher education degrees, find jobs in or outside of their communities; and increase their social mobility. It can be argued that Fraser's (2010) issues of redistribution, recognition

and representation can be solved (at least partially) by the participation of social enterprises in the Vietnamese education system. The weak ties (Granovetter, 2005) that the social enterprises offer provides the social networks and empowerment required to change familial perceptions of education and begin to disrupt or shift normative systems (Heiskala, 2007; Mulgan, 2009) (see Figure 1). Thus our paper seeks to explain strategies for reducing educational disadvantage in Vietnam that theoretically combines Fraser's (2010) justice model with Granovetter's concepts of social embeddedness (1985) and social network ties (2005), in order to show how social enterprise support can improve redistribution, recognition and representation.

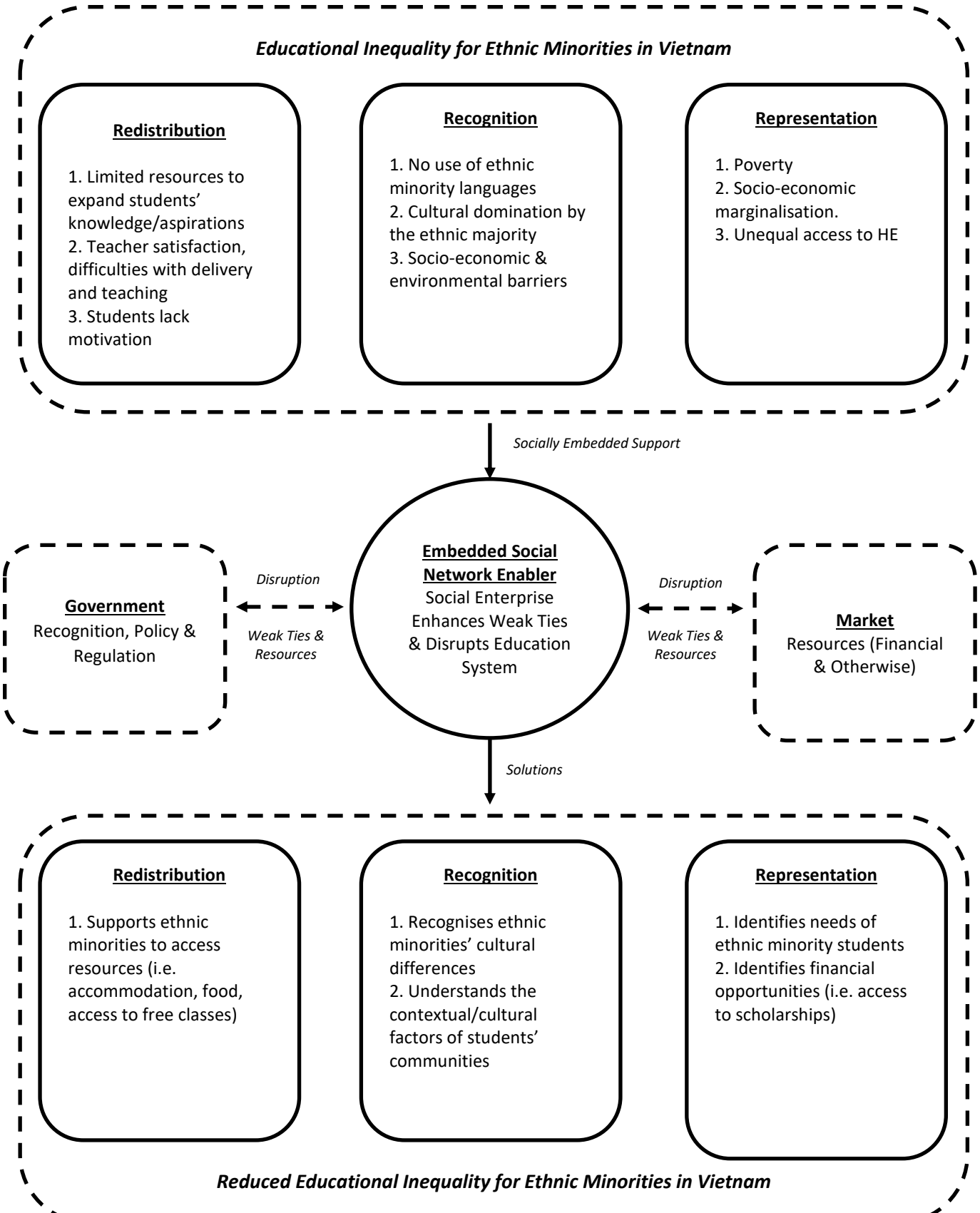

Figure 1 – Mechanisms of Social Embeddedness, Weak Ties and Three-Dimensional Educational Inequality

4. Data collection and analysis:

This research is based on a phenomenological approach to understanding the experiences of ethnic minority students who live in rural and mountainous parts of North-western Vietnam. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on "the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.90). Data was gathered from 33 interviews from four different sources: i) teachers (N=10); ii) students (N=20); iii) parents of a student (N=2); and iv) a social entrepreneur (N=1). The data from teachers, students and the parents were collected during visits to schools in the mountainous region of North-western Vietnam in October 2019. The sample included a total of 20 Vietnamese children, included those from Kinh (ethnic majority), H'mong and Muong ethnic backgrounds. We gathered data from two towns in North-western Vietnam and in each town two schools were visited. One town was largely inhabited by H'mong and the other one was inhabited by Muong people. There were only a small number of Kinh people in each school visited. Some of the teachers during the interviews stated that they were also coming from ethnic minority backgrounds, but not all of them shared this information. In this region the majority of the schools serve mostly ethnic minority students whose families work in agriculture. Since the schools were located in areas with dense populations of ethnic-minority groups; there were only a few students who were Kinh and spoke Kinh as their first language. During the same trip, one social enterprise specialising in ethnic minority students' education in North-western Vietnam was also visited.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews allowed a well-rounded insight into these participants' experiences and perspectives regarding ethnic minorities' schooling in rural Vietnam, helping to gain in-depth information about the participants' lives and experiences. Before the trip, having read the literature, the researchers were able to identify groups of people who should be included in the study. Therefore, the selection of the participants was based on purposive sampling. With purposive sampling, the researchers assume "based on their *a priori* theoretical understanding of the topic being studied, that certain categories of individuals may have a unique, different or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured" (Robinson, 2013, p. 32).

During the trip; the researchers held focus groups with the teachers and students. After the focus groups, one of the students and their parents also agreed to be interviewed separately. These interviews were 1:1 and treated as follow-up interviews from the focus groups. Most of the interviews were conducted in Kinh language since neither the teachers nor the students spoke fluent English. However, the students were keen to speak in English to the researchers, so in most cases, the students began talking in English before switching back to speaking Kinh. The researchers gave them the freedom to speak freely about school, family and everyday life. The official from the social enterprise and one student spoke fluent English and these two participants were interviewed in English. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. We acknowledge that translation between languages

involve interpretation (Ness et al., 2010) and can raise issues in qualitative research. However, to avoid any bias the transcriptions have been translated into English by two Vietnamese researchers separately, with discrepancies in the translations then discussed with common understandings then agreed. The research team consisted of three different nationalities, one of whom was from Vietnam. Therefore, for the other two researchers' reflexivity was encouraged since they were outsiders and it could have caused discomfort (Hamdan, 2009). For the two non-Vietnamese researchers, one was British, but with extensive experience of working in Vietnam with social enterprises over the last five years, during which time they have spent around six months in the country cumulatively. The other researcher was Turkish, and whilst this was the first time they had visited Vietnam, they had extensive experience of researching educational disadvantage in middle income countries in Asia. Therefore, the research team was seen to have diverse, but complementary skillsets that were beneficial in designing, gathering and interpreting the data.

The participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The interviews were analysed first using an inductive approach which "requires developing descriptions of actors' subjective cultural experiences", to generate codes and categories (Thorpe & Holt, 2008, p.2). After this, the categories were also analysed through the theoretical framework. Ethics approval was gained through the University's Ethics Committee in the UK before the trip and all the schools were asked for the necessary permissions for the interviews before the researchers' arrival in Vietnam. The following discussion centres around what the participants as argued were the challenges and barriers in living, teaching, and learning in rural Vietnam, as well as how they believed that educational inclusion could be improved.

5. Teaching and learning in the midst of poverty

Almost all of the schools visited in North-western Vietnam for this research either lacked resources or had resources that were old or broken. The majority of the teachers that took part in the research highlighted this issue and how learning resources are a key aspect of learning and teaching, as it has a direct impact on the quality of the education being provided. This is an acute problem for rural schools in particular as teachers argued:

> *Look, most of the stuff we own are broken or old. We have a projector that is half working. In urban schools they do not have these problems. The schools have enough money to buy new equipment for their students* (Lu, teacher).

> *Now, there are 20 classrooms in this school but we have only one projector so they need more projector to make lecture more interesting. It is hard to motivate students without the necessary resources* (Tien, teacher).

The teachers emphasised the significance of having the necessary resources for students to receive a good quality of education and also to engage them in learning. Rural-based teachers are often ethnic minorities themselves and they prefer to stay in their regions as they feel like they are giving back to their own community, but resourcing issues leave them feeling unmotivated and unequal to their urban peers. The majority of the teachers when asked, stated that if they were to teach in urban schools they would have better resources for teaching, better salaries and students who are more motivated to do well in school.

> *There will be a striking difference if I can teach at a school in the city centre, where students have better condition"* (Nguyen, teacher).

One of the teachers explained that the students living in the rural areas identified within the government's 135 Programme, are usually provided rice from the government every month. However, some students in other areas, that are not considered to be in these 135 areas, are not provided with this even if they are poor, highlighting the issue of distribution of resources essential for an adequate standard of living. According to one calculation, only 25% of the poorest quintile and 20% of the second poorest quintile of the nation are qualified and accepted for a full exemption of their children's tuition fees (London, 2011). These students have to go home at the weekends and get essentials from their parents:

> *In our province, most of the students live not too far from the school, the furthest house is about 10 km. They go to school by bike or a motorbike or they walk with their friends. Some of the students who live far from the school have to walk to school or they go to school together by 1 vehicle, they bring rice, food and staying at dormitories, they go back to their house at the weekend* (Nhi, teacher).

From the interviews, walking long distances and lack of accommodation near the schools came out as a persisting issue among students. Most of the students walk 40 to 45 minutes every morning to go to school, unless they live in a hall of residence nearby or have access to a motorbike, which is not always the case. One of the students interviewed stated that they wake up 5am to walk to school and interestingly enough they did not see this as an unusual practice. However, it is important to note that in previous research disability has been shown to be a key barrier for students' education. If students living in rural regions experience disability, then they may face access issues. Further, if students' parents have a disability then these students are the most affected in terms of enrolment (Cuong & Mont, 2011). These students often work to help their parents instead of going to school since the level of poverty in households experiencing disability are noted to be high (Palmer et al., 2015). Social enterprises can play a key role in limiting the impact of these disabilities, by supporting parents and students with access issues, and by innovating and using their networks to gain the resources required to overcome these barriers. Issues of inclusivity, inequitable resource distribution, of both school materials and/or everyday essentials (such as food), is a reality that most teachers and students face in North-western Vietnam, but one that may be more acute for those families experiencing disability. Indeed, remote and rural schools in Vietnam suffer from a scarcity of adequate teaching materials, which has a significant impact on students' learning, as well as on teaching practices. This points to the arguments made earlier around social enterprises' role as resource redistributors and socially embedded network enablers (Granovetter, 2005), that can help to redistribute resources to ethnic minorities in relation to Fraser's (2010) educational justice model.

6. Challenges and barriers ethnic minority students face

Vietnamese (Kinh) is the official language of instruction used in education. Many ethnic minority students do not have the experience of speaking Vietnamese before their schooling starts. In some areas, students from different minority groups could be found in the same schools and classrooms. For instance, the schools we visited had a majority of Muong ethnic minority students who talked in their own language among themselves more than Vietnamese. This raises the question of Vietnamese being the only official language in schools, as whilst the teachers who participated in our research were mostly born and bred in the areas we visited, it is likely that many teachers may not speak a minority language being from Kinh backgrounds themselves (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001).

During our interviews with both students and teachers, it became evident that a majority of the ethnic minority students have trouble with academic writing. They can speak Vietnamese, but it does not

mean that they can succeed in their studies. This also affects teachers' performance. Teachers that teach literature or grammar were unanimous on the fact that ethnic minority students struggle more with reading and writing compared to the students whose first language was Vietnamese. Other teachers, such as Maths teachers, did not comment on the language issues as much.

> *Some students are not good in Vietnamese, so sometimes, they answer questions in Muong language. It is same as talking, they write poorly, the sentences are not connected. Especially, when they don't understand the lecture or don't agree with teacher, they will talk to each other in Muong language. Little students find difficulty in reading; the intonation is not right. Their vocabulary is basic so they can't understand academic vocabulary or Sino-Vietnamese*[2] (Nhung, teacher)

> *There are more than 90% students in my class who are Muong students and Thai students. The ethnic students who are living near the centre have less difficulty compare to others living in remote areas or 135 areas in speaking. So, the challenge is explaining the meaning of words or sentences for them. I find this more challenging compared to teaching science subjects such as math, physic, chemistry. I have to find the word in Muong language first with the same meaning to explain the literature pieces* (Tam, teacher).

Some of the students' responses were also similar, they mentioned having language issues that affected their learning, whilst language issues also inhibited parental/teacher communication:

> *At school, I talk in 2 languages: my ethnic language and common language (Kinh). At home, my parents do not know common language, I often speak my language. The difficulty in using both languages is that it is difficult to talk with other ethnic people. At school, although I often talk with other ethnic people by common language but I often talk with same ethnic people with my language* (Hao, student).

> *My parents are illiterate people so that they do not care about my results at school. My parents seldom askes to me about that. My teachers cannot really talk to them* (Tuyen, student).

> *My teacher contacts my sister by her calling on the phone. My parents never go to parents – teacher meeting for me, they live really far away and do not speak the common language* (Linh, student).

This is significant since if and when students have issues in school, neither teachers nor students have a shared linguistic or cultural space to engage with the families. As the evidence shows, the lack of common language between teachers and students/parents affects both teaching and learning in rural schools in Vietnam.

The 135 Programme aimed to increase ethnic minority children's access to schooling by ensuring that ethnic minority students acquire the same subject knowledge as students in urban schools (Hamano, 2008). However, it was argued that the 135 programme confines ethnic minority students to a knowledge base belonging to the Kinh culture and it does not completely recognise the students' local

[2] In Vietnam, Kinh people use a lot of Sino-Vietnamese to make the sentences shorter (it is like talking more informally) so the teacher has to explain things often for ethnic students.

needs (Dejaeghere, Wu & Vu, 2013). This creates an issue of recognition among ethnic minorities that needs to be addressed better, with greater consideration of local needs, so that ethnic minority people could feel comfortable to take part in educational and social spaces.

> *They just live with their community and communicate with people belong to their community so they are so close and quiet when meeting strangers and they don't join the collective activities at school because they feel shy in crowded places. A Homeroom Teacher will follow a class in 3 years (From grade 10 to 12) to help ethnic students in class to be more confident and sociable by making many collective activities in class* (Chau, teacher).

> *"Ethnic people are shy, reserved and they are not confident enough. Their school results are also not very good because their languages are barriers to their studying at school. They also do not receive enough information about what they can do in the future. They do not always find education meaningful"* (Uyen, teacher).

Teaching and learning should be tailored uniquely to the context of rural schools and communities, to ensure that all students, whether they are an ethnic minority or majority, have the same equity of access, resources, and opportunity in schools. The findings demonstrate that far more attention should be given to the contextual and cultural factors of students' communities, with recognition of what shapes their ideas of education. The importance of cultural context in a student's grasp of the benefits of education has been highlighted in prior research (Çiftçi & Cin, 2018), so if students do not find their education valuable within their community context, they may choose to withdraw. Justice today requires both redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997), so to combat educational injustice, we also need representation for those who face economic and cultural disadvantages. Social enterprises can play this role as network enablers and socially innovative systemic disruptors (Granovetter, 2005; Mulgan, 2019), by representing ethnic minority needs, and gaining the resources and recognition (Fraser, 2010) that they require to engage with education.

7. The question of maldistribution, recognition, and representation

The issues of maldistribution and recognition that the ethnic minority students experience also lead to representation problems, especially in how participation of ethnic minorities diminishes in shaping the system. Due to socio-economic problems and cultural misrecognition, ethnic minorities do not access the same quality of education and face inequitable distribution of resources. The centralised education system in Vietnam does not recognise and give representation to different ethnic groups' cultural, social practices, nor provide relevant skills and knowledge for ethnic groups to strive for a better future.

Cultural injustices are often linked to economic inequality, and our interviews indicated that the biggest reason why the students did not want to carry on with education was financial. The majority of the teachers voiced their concerns about their ethnic-minority students' economic backgrounds and how it is difficult to get a job in Vietnam. Poor distribution of resources in rural areas and the economic problems that ethnic minority groups face, seemed to convince both parents and students that going to university, or receiving further education was not relevant to their lives. Ongoing poverty made it difficult for the teachers to make the students feel motivated about going to university.

> *The biggest problem now is that students cannot get a job after graduation even they attend university or a higher education institute, so they don't want to learn much. It's hard to make students concentrate in learning (…) Some parents care about their children, they encourage their children study hard but it is too hard to have a job after graduated university. 90% parents here are farmer so they are poor and learning at university requires a lot of money for 4 years, but after graduated, their children cannot have a job.* (Chi, teacher).

> *All my ethnic students that I'm teaching have a difficult life in this region; they live in isolation and poverty. Some students do not have enough food to eat and warm clothes to wear. They have to earn money, so sometimes they do not go to school. All these things affect a lot their studying* (Dinh, teacher).

> *The socio-economic background of my students effects my teaching. They often have to go home to help their families do housework. For example, in harvest time, they go home to do farming* (Chung, teacher).

Both the students and teachers mentioned during the interviews that their families have no interest in sending them to school, as they believed that school does not necessarily provide them with the skills and knowledge that the students need to live and work in rural Vietnam:

> *Economic condition affects students' lives, their studies, such as if they want to study at higher education institutes to learn more, but they don't have money, so they can't. About life condition and culture, education level of people in the district is not as well as people in towns or cities - both the parents and students'. They think that after graduating from 12th grade, they will become workers, or get married (in Vietnam, especially in remote areas, they still get married from a young age), or become farmers, they will not go to university. Students' parents think this way, so students are affected by their parents' thoughts* (Phong, teacher).

The students interviewed perceived education from their parents' perspectives, and these students' expectations for their future were similar to their parents' lives. However, we cannot generalise this to all the participants we talked to, as there were some students who talked about how their parents are encouraging them to study and have a better life than the ones their parents had. Overall though, students' families are poor, and even if they want to study further, they see money as the biggest concern. During our interviews, most of the teachers mentioned that they would like to help their students, but that their own salaries are barely enough for themselves and their families. In Vietnam, teachers are indicated to devote significant efforts in overcoming different barriers in the scarcity of teaching resources and equipment, as well as the remaining low quality of infrastructure and facilities. Within the limited materials they are allocated, teachers' practices have reflected a lot of proactiveness and creativity (Nguyen et al., 2014).

The teachers we spoke with were mostly born and bred in these rural areas, coming from ethnic minority groups themselves. Some of them believed that it was their responsibility to help the ethnic minority students and support them to be recognised in society. One of the teachers said that they were one of the first people to graduate from a university in their village, and that they wanted to come back to help children and their community. This desire to help their native communities meant that they eschewed working in an urban school, even though it could have been better for them

socially and financially. Some of the teachers also believed that whilst the government tried their best to support teachers' salaries in rural areas, it was not enough to alleviate financial hardship. One of the teachers made a comment about needing a company, NGO or some kind of an association in their area that can provide them with adequate teaching resources, help their students, raise awareness among parents and students about the importance of learning, and most importantly represent the ethnic minorities' needs and issues more broadly in Vietnamese society.

> *The government tried their best to support teachers regards to our salaries but the financial support is not enough. I wish there was a company, NGO or an association that can help us to have good equipment for teaching and help changing the minds of parents and students about the importance of learning (Thuy, teacher).*

This statement from the teacher brings us to the discussion of the role that social entrepreneurship plays in terms of launching initiatives capable of diminishing the inequalities the ethnic minority students experience.

8.Social entrepreneurship as a tool for supporting local communities: addressing maldistribution, recognition, and representation

Challenging inequalities and raising awareness on the needs of ethnic minorities living in rural areas requires working and collaborating with the community itself to create bottom-up initiatives to generate resources and represent the ethnic minorities. This can reduce equity and equality issues in rural education. This brings us to the interview conducted with an educational social enterprise helping minorities in North-western Vietnam. Ethnic minority students stay in the enterprise, eat there and get free English classes. They also support ethnic minority women who have never been to school and provide them with classes. The social enterprise was founded by an ethnic minority entrepreneur; this is important since the owner understands and wants to give back to the community, thus they are embedded (Granovetter, 1985; 2005).

> *Our organisation was built with the aim of supporting our local community. We are a social enterprise and we have different businesses, but these are all used to benefit the local people here, this is the key for our enterprise (…) we want to give equal opportunities to all ethnic minority people (*Phong, social enterprise official)*.*

This relates to the embedded nature of the entrepreneurial action, and also to the bottom-up representation of ethnic minorities. One of the students interviewed, who had a scholarship to study and stay in the enterprise, commented on how lucky they were:

> *I think when I graduate high school, I want to join a vocational training in hotel and restaurant services. I want to get out of this difficult life, I do not want to be a farmer like my parents anymore. When I started to study, no one encouraged me. I have been living, studying and working alone here. I look up to people who studied at schools and become successful. My teachers don't know my parents, they call my big sister because my parents can't read or speak common language (Kinh language). Being able to go to school here has been the luckiest thing for me already* (Thom, student).

One of the female students talked about how much they valued education and believed that it was the only way to create a better future. This student said all her sisters got married very early and stayed in their villages and she wanted to do more with her life and needed education for that. When this student's parents were interviewed, they were also immensely grateful for the scholarship their daughter received from the social enterprise:

> *Without this help (from the social enterprise), our daughter could not be able to attend a high school. We are farmers, and we do not have any means to support any of our daughters' educational needs. Luckily one of them now is getting education* (Giang, parent).

The social entrepreneur emphasised the fact that the government's policies do not consider the issues of ethnic minorities as much as they should. In relation to this, each local school's needs are funded by the central government and funding is limited. School managers can make requests for funding, but it is the official from central government that needs to approve requests. Since many schools are competing for limited funding, there have been cases of bribery reported (see: Thi Hoa, 2020; McCornac, 2012). Those schools that can offer bribes thus receive better treatment from the government. Social enterprises can therefore also play a role in helping to prevent such corruption, by supporting schools to develop innovative programmes and fund them from non-state sources such as NGOs and corporates. It is certainly clear that there is a top-down approach, and the local needs are not usually met. This is compounded often by parental views of higher education, due to corruption in the graduate job market, whereby graduates may have to pay bribes (sometimes as much as 1-2 years their annual salary), in order to gain employment (Doan, Le and Tran, 2018). This is a system that favours those with economic, cultural and social capital; resources that most disadvantaged ethnic minorities do not have access to.

There is therefore a need for the implementation of local policies to specifically help ethnic minorities in Northern and rural Vietnam, hence the criticality of third sector involvement to support ethnic minorities:

> *We want to do something really good for our community. We want to give something back for our community. We are an enterprise that whatever we receive from our hotel, café, and shop we give it back to the community. We support students until the age of 25; we support them in terms of food and accommodation. Besides we have English classes for students here. We also support people who have never been to school, especially women and provide them with classes* (Phong, social enterprise official).

The social enterprise identifies the needs of the ethnic minority students and supports their aspirations, so that they are recognised equally in educational settings and do not fall behind their peers who are not classified as ethnic minorities. This approach of implementation is similar to the repairing mechanism defined among social innovation in education by Howaldt et al. (2017), in which the initiatives do not see the challenge at the system level, but try to repair or replace small functions or components of it locally. This mechanism is common at grassroots levels by addressing specific failures/problems of specific vulnerable communities.

> *We guide ethnic minority students to get scholarships so they can study. We help students who want to study at high school or university level. It depends on what they want but we try and support all their needs. When ethnic minority students have more opportunities to study, it is really good for them. It changes their minds, they gain more knowledge and then they can also come back here to support the next generation* (Phong, social enterprise official).

People who receive education hold considerable advantages in society over those who do not, with education becoming the key factor in the distribution of privilege (Lynch & Lodge, 2004). The social enterprise seeks to provide all the ethnic minority students with formal education, so that they are

not considered disadvantaged in society (or at least some of the elements of this disadvantage are reduced). Cultural and social norms impact on how social enterprises develop and the relationship between this social enterprise and ethnic minorities living in the region indicates the importance of embeddedness. Locally practiced social entrepreneurship supports ethnic minority students with their studies, whilst also supporting the local area by employing ethnic minority people. By helping ethnic minorities to pursue education, providing them with employment and skills, the social enterprise aims to address the inequalities and challenges ethnic minorities face due to misdistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation within Vietnamese society.

9.Conclusions: How do social networks improve issues of redistribution, recognition and representation among ethnic minority people?

This paper addresses the challenges teachers and students face in North-western Vietnam due to living in rural communities. The interviews with teachers, students, parents and the social enterprise, support our argument that ethnic minority students in North-western Vietnam have limited resources; whilst governmental help is insufficient in terms of alleviating wider cultural and socioeconomic factors that affect ethnic minority livelihoods. This is in part due to the top-down focus of government policy and a lack of embedded understanding of ethnic minority communities. The narratives of the participants addressed some of the persistent and pressing issues (i.e. poverty) regarding working and living in rural regions. Understanding the nature, formation and the benefits of Granovetter's (2005) weak ties (i.e. the social enterprise) in societies in North-western Vietnam is essential for government and NGOs to develop initiatives and policies that enhance the lives of ethnic minorities. By using Fraser's (2010) three-dimensional justice model this research posits how redistribution, recognition and representation issues could be identified and addressed through social networks mediated by social enterprise.

Maldistribution of resources is the first barrier to quality of education in North-western Vietnam, since this raises an issue of inequality between ethnic minority students living in rural Vietnam and students living in urban cities. The paper has demonstrated that rural North-western Vietnam also experiences the uneven educational development identified in other studies focused on rural education (Çiftçi & Cin, 2018), whilst also demonstrating that disadvantaged ethnic minority communities do not have the social networks required to access resources to achieve their goals (Brass, 1984; Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 2001). This means that students and their families do not have the *tools* required for their own empowerment and so experience barriers through misdistribution of resources (Fraser, 2010). For families living in remote villages and working in low-paid or subsistence agriculture, it is natural to question how they can afford to send their children on to higher education. Ethnic minority culture is not recognised by the state and the education system is not built towards their needs, which stops them from feeling empowered. Poverty becomes one of the key reasons why families do not put too much emphasis on the significance of schooling and they question the relevance of schooling in their everyday lives. The centralised education system in Vietnam is not adaptable to rural communities' lives, whilst the curriculum in schools does not necessarily incorporate the realities of rural living. Most teachers are also concerned that there are not enough employment opportunities for ethnic minority students after leaving education and this causes discouragement for students to attend higher education. Indeed, some of the students rather work in their villages, bring money to their homes than spending money to attend universities, especially when post graduate employment remains uncertain. Recognising these issues, and understanding ethnic minorities' needs can lead to better participation in higher education, by enabling them to *feel* empowered (Fraser, 2010).

Another significant challenge faced by teachers and students is in relation to using Kinh as a common language. The findings suggest that students struggle to study using the Kinh language and would rather prefer to speak their mother tongue in school. This is a recognition issue (Fraser, 2010) since Kinh is the dominant culture and ethnic minorities are not allowed to use their own language even if they represent the majority in their schools. This leads to students feeling less confident, becoming shy and feeling disempowered; ultimately this leads to ethnic minority students succeeding less in class and discourages applications to further education. This provides another example of how ethnic minorities socio-economic position and lack of social networks negatively mediates behaviours and attitudes to education (Brass, 1984; Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 2001).

Recognising and representing the needs, views and values of ethnic minority people and integrating these into students' educational experiences will allow ethnic minorities to feel and become empowered; therefore, ethnic minorities will not become alienated from the people who live outside of their communities. Indeed, representation and empowerment as identified in Fraser's (2010) work, is an effective form of social innovation (Mulgan, 2019). Social enterprises working in these communities have the opportunity to understand the local structures and promote ethnic minorities' needs, create bottom-up solutions, and actively disrupt the aforementioned barriers to education inherent within the system. In this sense social enterprises become educational innovators actively disrupting normative structures in the community (Heiskala, 2007; Mulgan, 2019). Communities' customs, their sense of belonging to their communities, and cultural differences are the key elements to be taken into consideration when policies are designed to empower ethnic minority groups within the educational system. Empowerment is a process where people and communities gain control over their circumstances and have access to the necessary resources to gain this control (Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, this paper contends that social enterprises act to empower ethnic minorities in Vietnam, by enhancing their weak ties (Granovetter, 2005), disrupting societal structures that inhibit ethnic minority educational achievement, and hence providing enabling mechanisms for these disadvantaged groups to overcome the three-dimensional inequality that they experience (Fraser, 2010).

This paper presented some of the pressing educational issues present in rural North-western Vietnam through the voices of teachers and ethnic minority students living in these regions. The authors acknowledge the limitations of the research in terms of focusing on a specific location in Vietnam, the short timescale of the research and potential language/cultural barriers in engaging in cross-cultural research. We cannot generalise the outcome of this research considering that we conducted only a limited number of interviews, and there are many other ethnic, gender and language related issues in different parts of Vietnam that were not considered in this paper. However, this paper represents a basis from which to highlight the most basic and still unresolved issues ethnic minority students and teachers face due to issues of remoteness and language, as well as considering the importance of the third sector's involvement in the local community.

More importantly, this research only examined one social enterprise that specifically works on educational inequality. While this specific social enterprise's structure and work helps ethnic minorities in North-western Vietnam receive education, we cannot generalise this outcome to argue that all social enterprises will be successful in the same way. Indeed, it is still the state's responsibility to ensure that all its citizens receive the same quality of education. There is also an existing criticism in literature towards entrepreneurship since "it is perceived to be part of the political ideology of capitalism and not in the interests of developing countries" (Haugh & Talwar, 2014, p.655). However, social entrepreneurship can potentially provide a bridge between ethnic minority people and the

normative institutions and cultures that currently exclude them from accessing quality education, through their unique focus on hybrid models (Doherty, Haugh and Lyon, 2014).

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