

Improve the Professional Ability of Khmer Ethnic Minority Secondary School Teachers in Southwestern Vietnam to Meet the Educational Reform Requirements

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ABSTRACT The contingent of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers in Vietnam has contributed to the universalization of lower secondary education, creating learning opportunities and equity in education for Khmer ethnic children. Therefore, Khmer minority secondary school teachers play an important role in the education of the frontier provinces; they also had several deficits in professional ability, on the other hand. 1536 Khmer teachers attended the research on improving the ability of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers through a case study in Southwestern Vietnam, more than half (57.2%) were male teachers. The professional ability was measured by a professional qualification, English proficiency, and computer proficiency. The result has shown that less than half of Khmer teachers meet with the Ministry of Education and Training criteria for professional ability. An urgent need for education is to improve the professional ability of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers as society grows.

INTRODUCTION

In the past several decades, the importance of teacher learning has become more pronounced in the education literature (Smylie 1997). According to Leu (2005), if the school is the important functional locus of efforts for improving quality, certainly the most critical factor within the school in facilitating student learning is the teacher. Furthermore, Sembiring (2002) found that the teachers are the main factors and play an important role in teaching and learning in school. Today, the cycle of fundamental and systematic education renewal towards modernization and international integration needs the efforts of society as a whole. In particular, teachers have a very important role in contributing to this innovation, because they are the direct force (Huynh et al. 2018). They must also be able to develop practices that reflect the expansion of subject-matter knowledge and new knowledge about teaching and learning (Smylie 1997). The way

teachers teach is of critical concern in any reform designed to improve quality (UNESCO 2004). Therefore the preparation must be carried out regularly and effectively in order to improve the professional skill of teachers so that teachers can perform their job well. In recent years, the number of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers in Vietnam's Southwest has increased rapidly. This team has contributed to the completion of lower secondary education universalization in the development of education in order to create learning opportunities for Khmer students and to exercise equity in education for Khmer students. They also a necessary team must improve professional ability to fulfill educational renovation needs today. Because that the quality of education depends on the quality of teachers, particularly in the initial stages of education when the pupils are at an early age, and especially in the rural areas (Carron and Châu 1996).

The Khmer ethnic group in Vietnam is one of 54 Vietnam ethnic groups concentrated in southern Vietnam, with around 1.2 million people residing there. They have their own culture like language, tradition, exceptionally unique customs. Ethnic Khmer live on agriculture, subsistence, creating wet rice civilization; have a long tradition of folklore, have their own written

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language, forming rich tangible and intangible culture. Also, the Khmer have ideas of fear of losing ancient cultural practices such as fear of losing their voice and writing, rigid mentality, most of them have a quiet, passive state, fear of learning new things, lack of openness that leads to restricted creativeness. Ethnic features, economic life originate psychological characteristics and typical characteristics of Khmer Secondary School teachers. Furthermore, Khmer secondary school teachers are less involved in engaging in movements, especially experiential initiatives, and scientific study. Thus, it can be seen that Khmer secondary school teachers' awareness is still limited prior to the request for educational innovation. Besides, Xuan (2017) also stated that some backward Khmer practices and psychology have had a direct or indirect impact on the physical and spiritual development of Khmer Secondary School teachers. Thereby, it can be seen that Khmer Secondary School teachers have many difficulties, affecting their professional ability.

Many factors contribute to the quality of teaching, such as the professional ability of the teacher, which includes subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of teaching and learning, curricular knowledge, teaching experience, cultural differences, and certification status (Grossman 1995; Huynh et al. 2018; Shulman 1986; Tran-Chi et al. 2020; Westera 2001). Additionally, ability is the knowledge, skills, capacities, and behaviors that a human being must have to meet job requirements, and is an element that helps an individual work more effectively. According to APA Dictionary of Psychology, ability is existing competence or skill to perform a specific physical or mental act. Covaliov (1971) also defines ability is a collection or combination of psychological attributes of an individual person, meeting labor requirements and ensuring that activities achieve high results. Professional abilities are psychological, physiological attributes, professional qualifications that make up the ability to complete a certain type of professional activities with high quality. Accordingly, teacher's professional ability is the psychological attributes of teachers that create the ability to complete teaching and education activities with high quality (Tan 2012). Besides, professional ability of teachers

is competence related to the ability to master the knowledge, these competencies should be owned by every teacher in order to achieve success in learning and teaching (Rahman 2014). In addition to be a broad concept, the term "competence" or "competency" is quite new in education and still used as an equal standard (CEPPE 2013; Mayer et al. 2005; Peklaj 2015; Süral 2019; Torrance and Forde 2017)

Secondary school teachers in general and Khmer secondary school teachers, in particular, are an important factor determining the quality of lower secondary education in ethnic minority areas. However, there are still many shortcomings in their professional ability. Secondary teachers of Khmer ethnic minority have limited Vietnamese language, recent training programs have not focused on this content, so these teachers have difficulty innovating methods, as well as learning and training (Xuan 2017). Therefore, improving the professional capacity to train a contingent of Khmer primary school teachers on the spot has both pedagogical qualifications and general knowledge to help them fundamentally renovate education in the Southwest, Vietnam as well as fulfill the new educational requirements, is absolutely necessary.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The method of convenience sampling was used to recruit voluntary Khmer teachers to assist with the research and administer the survey. In six provinces of Southwestern Vietnam, the survey instrument was distributed to 1536 Khmer teachers, with a 100 percent return rate that exceeds the 30 percent response rate that most researchers require for analysis (Dillman 2000). From 1536 respondents who completed the survey instrument, the sample of this study was drawn. There were fewer females (42.8%) than males (57.2%) among the 1536 Khmer teachers surveyed. Of these, 728 (47.4%) came from Soc Trang province, 411 (26.8%) came from Tra Vinh province, 128 (8.3%) came from Kien Giang province, 124 (8.1%) came from An Giang province, 94 (6.1%) came from Bac Lieu province and 51 (3.3%) came from Ca Mau province. Besides, 378 Khmer teachers were communists out of

1536 teachers. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants.

Table 1: The professional ability of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers

Province	Khmer teacher			
	Number of Khmer teachers	Male	Female	Communist
Kien Giang	128	64	64	6
An Giang	124	70	54	13
Bac Lieu	94	59	35	20
Ca Mau	51	38	13	5
Soc Trang	728	411	317	189
Tra Vinh	411	237	174	145
Total	1536	879	657	378

Measure

Questionnaires are designed to survey Khmer teachers of six provinces in Southwestern Vietnam. First, social-demographic items were introduced in the questionnaire. Then, the professional ability of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers was measured by professional qualification, English proficiency, and computer proficiency. Based on the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Training of job titles and professional qualifications: Bachelor’s degree, Elementary of English proficiency, and Specialist of Computer proficiency.

Analysis

All participants were provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the purpose of the research. The Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 was used for data analyses. Descriptive statistics were calculated as a preliminary analysis.

RESULTS

Among the six provinces surveyed, the top Bachelor’s degree indicators, listed from the highest to the lowest percentages, are as below: Kien Giang (48.44%), Bac Lieu (41.49%), An Giang (41.13%), Soc Trang (40.80%), Tra Vinh (27.25%) and Ca Mau (21.57%). The top Associate degree indicators, listed from the lowest to the highest percentages, are as below: Kien Giang (47.66%), Bac Lieu (56.38%), Soc Trang (58.38%), An Giang (58.87%), Tra Vinh (71.78%) and Ca Mau (72.55%), as shown in Table 2.

There are 111 (7.22%) teachers who have Elementary level and 37 (2.41%) teachers who have Intermediate level in English proficiency, meet the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Training of English proficiency. In Computer proficiency, 811 Khmer teachers (52.80%) meet the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Training of Computer proficiency, 600 in Specialist level and others in Expert level.

Table 2: The professional ability of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers

Province	Number of Khmer teachers	Professional qualification				English proficiency		Computer proficiency			
		Associate degree		Bachelor’s degree		A2	B1	A	B		
		n	%	n	%						
Kien Giang	128	61	47.66	62	48.44	1	4	15	6	74	13
An Giang	124	73	58.87	51	41.13	0	0	12	5	69	11
Bac Lieu	94	53	56.38	39	41.49	0	2	4	0	39	8
Ca Mau	51	37	72.55	11	21.57	0	3	7	3	11	4
Soc Trang	728	425	58.38	297	40.80	1	5	52	16	242	74
Tra Vinh	411	295	71.78	112	27.25	0	4	21	7	165	101
Total	1536	944	61.46	572	37.24	2	18	111	37	600	211

n: Number of participants; %: Percentage; (level) A2: Elementary; B1: Intermediate; A: Specialist; B: Expert.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the current situation of Khmer secondary school teachers' professional competencies in several aspects such as: psychological and quality characteristics, implementation of education renovation policy, and participation in movements and professional skills. Descriptive statistics of the survey results reported that in terms of psychological and quality characteristics, the Khmer have a long tradition of folklore, have their own written language, forming rich tangible and intangible culture. Therefore, Khmer teachers are still proud of their long history of culture and civilization, afraid of losing their voices and scripts. For this reason, they are also afraid of learning new items, lack of openness, and leading to minimal creativity. Regarding the implementation of the policy of renovating education and participating in movements, in fact, the knowledge of Khmer lower secondary school teachers before the demand for educational innovation is still minimal. However, Khmer secondary school teachers are less involved in engaging in movements, especially in writing initiatives and scientific research. According to the research results, it indicated that Khmer Secondary School teachers are still limited in improving professional, foreign language, and informatics skills; some teachers need to be retrained to supplement their knowledge or rearrange job positions accordingly. The findings are consistent with the research conducted by Rahman (2014), which notes that the professional ability of junior high school science teachers is included in the good enough group, which means that quality improvement is still needed for the professional ability of teachers. It is therefore necessary for the Department of Education and Training to speed up the programme, to provide a training schedule to increase the standard for Khmer Secondary School teachers, and cultivate the level of foreign languages and information technology. In the current context, this is both a strategic and urgent issue for our country's education industry.

In summary, the career ability of a part of Khmer Secondary School teachers is still constrained by an appraisal of the situation of Khmer Secondary School teachers before the request for educational renovation. Training and

cultivating problems therefore require special attention, in which the focus of training and cultivation must be consistent with the specific needs of Khmer Secondary School teachers in ethnic minority areas. So they need concrete solutions such as: renovation of Khmer Secondary School teacher training and cultivating; training methods and forms; the management of training and retraining activities and renovation in assessment of training and cultivating. In addition, in the learning implementation, a teacher should master teaching materials presented in a way that a teacher must also master a variety of teaching methods so that what is delivered can be well understood by the students (Rahman 2014).

CONCLUSION

On the whole, Secondary school teachers in general, and Khmer Secondary School teachers in particular, are main factor determining the quality of lower secondary education in the Khmer ethnic minority region. It is therefore important to rapidly train and cultivate Khmer Secondary School teachers contingent with both pedagogical skills and general knowledge to assist them comprehensively renovate education in the Southwestern Vietnam region.

In order to provide a team of Khmer and Kinh Secondary School teachers to meet the criteria of educational innovation in ethnic minority areas, to meet the standards of job titles and professional qualifications at a good and appropriate level with the characteristics of the Khmer ethnic group; each Department of Education and Training, Education and Training Committee Division and the Southwest Secondary Schools should promote the achieved results and overcome the shortcomings. Currently, difficulties depend on developing approaches that meet realistic criteria in order to execute well the strategic goals of educational advancement in the Khmer ethnic minority areas. Improving Khmer Secondary school teachers' professional ability is basically improving human capital in the Khmer ethnic minority region to address the educational quality difference between the standard and ethnic areas. As the society develops, the requirements for higher quality education, so improving Khmer Secondary School teachers'

professional ability is an urgent need in today's educational renovation context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results helped provide critical recommendation for improving professional abilities of Khmer ethnic minority secondary school teachers in Southwestern Vietnam in bringing about educational reforms.

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