

# ORIGINAL RESEARCH: **Factors associated with low educational motivation among ethnic minority students in Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the issue of academic underachievement among ethnic minority students at secondary level in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam through an examination of the factors relating to low educational motivation and its consequences for academic performance. The findings revealed that ethnic minority students faced numerous challenges in gaining and/or maintaining adequate motivation for education. They did not enjoy sufficient conducive conditions for formal schooling, and their living environment was not appropriate for good educational performance. Other factors included limited parental engagement, low level of peer support, and above all low occupational outcomes that reduced the motivation to view education as a social ladder. As a result, they undervalued education, hardly accepting that education could result in positive outcomes in their life, and therefore they lacked motivational attitudes and aspirations for high educational performance.

**Keywords:** Academic performance, Educational motivation, Ethnic minority students, Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

The issue of academic underachievement among ethnic minority students has attracted the attention of many researchers worldwide. It is widely accepted that factors affecting the educational attainment of ethnic minority students are diverse. In order to explore causes and offer explanations for the phenomenon, researchers have investigated various factors including academic ability, family structures, individual and familial aspirations, cultural differences, socio-economic background, language difficulties, self-esteem, prejudice, and lack of resources as explanations (Tomlinson, 1991).

Motivation for high educational achievement has emerged as one of the prominent factors affecting education performance of any child at any level and of any ethnicity. Wentzel and Wigfield (2009) highlighted the significant role of motivation in educational attainment of a child as the central feature of the success of a child at school. Findings from a meta-analysis of 109 studies conducted by Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley and Carlstrom (2004) also revealed that achievement motivation was the second best predictor of school performance among the nine broad sets of psychosocial and study skill factors tested in the research.

Motivation is defined as “an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behavior” (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 366). Motivation is usually described as consisting of two different categories namely intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal factors in individuals that inspire them to engage in certain activities for their own sake (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Thus, the tasks are performed for the performers’ joy, interest or satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to the external reasons for performing the tasks. Extrinsic motivation occurs when performers believe that the tasks will lead to some distinct outcomes or consequences (Deci, 1971).

Traditional theorists look into emotive drives and needs together with rewards and punishments as the basis of school motivation. However, in the past decades, social cognitive theories have become dominant. Theoretical perspectives of motivation currently focus on self-belief, self-efficacy, achievement expectancies,

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attributions, and a sense of control over an individual's efforts, persistence and performance (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser and Davis-Kean (2006) point out that the current theories on achievement motivation continue to highlight the child's beliefs, values, and goals as the prominent determinants influencing the motivation for achievement. The central constructs of the theories include self-efficacy, goals, interests, intrinsic motivation, and achievement values.

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000) argues that people are motivated based on three fundamental psychological needs namely competence, relatedness, and autonomy. When fully satisfied, individuals are intrinsically motivated. If any of the needs are not satisfied, the engagement is not intrinsically but extrinsically motivated. Students will be more motivated in their learning if they have a supportive learning environment. They gain intrinsic motivation from their tasks or learning subjects, from their teachers' perception, from peer support or from social interactions. They can increase their motivation through internalization, the process of adopting and integrating the values, choice, attitudes, and standard into the learners' own identity (Ryan and Connell, 1989; Deci and Ryan, 2002; Reeve, Deci and Ryan, 2004).

Achievement goal theory, according to Covington (2000), views motivation as a drive, a need, or an internal state that lead individuals towards action. Goal theory focuses on the reasons why people make the choices to be engaged in certain outcomes or behaviors and avoid others, rather than focusing on what individuals try to achieve (Urduan & Maehr, 1995; Maehr and Zusho, 2009). The theory assumes that motivation is a process, and focuses on the learners' beliefs, perceptions, and strategies (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Achievement goal theory suggests that students long for good academic performance having a desire to understand the course contents, to prove that they are knowledgeable about the tasks, and to show that they are smarter or have higher academic capacity than others (Ames, 1992; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, and Thrash, 2002, Maehr and Zusho, 2009).

According to Murdock (2009), "motivation does not reside within people, but is a product of the person in context" (p. 434). Murdock believes that regarding the differences in educational achievement of students from different ethnic origins, researchers should use achievement motivation theories as a tool to understand the phenomenon, and should include investigations on the differences of levels of motivation variables and study the motivational processes among different racial and ethnic groups. Therefore to understand the school motivation of a particular racial or ethnic group, the context where the students of that particular racial or ethnic group shape and develop their school motivation should be taken into consideration. Murdock also adds that researchers should consider facets of societal dimensions of racial and ethnic status such as cultural values, cultural stereotypes, discrimination and economic conditions as they may explain some of the differences in the levels of academic engagement in school activities.

Based on a review of 140 studies on educational motivation of African Americans to explore the link between ethnic minority status and motivation, Graham (1994) found that African Americans had high educational expectations, perceived their beliefs in personal control, and enjoyed positive self-regard. The findings failed to support the assumptions that ethnic minority students lacked a motive for success, lacked confidence in internal or personal control of outcomes, and had negative self-views about their competence.

According to Chavous et al. (2003) ethnic minority children who experience strong ethnic identification and less social inequity feel that education is personally meaningful and relevant. These experiences become a motivational factor for students' engagement in education. Chavous et al. believe that there is a link between educational motivation and academic achievement. The youths who are aware of educational values, purposes, and meanings will have higher levels of school engagement, performance and persistence.

Portes and Wilson (1976), in a study investigating the differences of educational attainment between black and white American students, found that black students who had higher self-esteem, higher educational aspirations and greater encouragement would have higher educational attainment than their white counterparts with other factors such as socioeconomic level, mental ability and parental status being similar.

In a study examining how cultural and structural factors influence ethnic differences in academic performance, Kim (2002) indicates that educational aspirations play a role in predicting children's academic performance. Aldous (2006) argues that a child regardless of ethnicity and background factors will get better academic attainments if his parents place higher expectations on him and if he has higher educational aspirations. Chavous et al. (2003) indicate a positive relationship between ethnic minority students' educational aspirations and their group identity. Centrality and ethnic group pride have some effect on future educational attainments of students such as high school graduation, and college attendance (Chavous et al., 2003). Chavous et al. also assert that the youths with educational purposes and capability of learning who recognize the value of education show better school engagement and better academic performance.

Ethnic injustice is found to be associated with the academic performance of ethnic minority children. Those experiencing ethnic injustice have higher levels of discounting and devaluing education which result in lower academic outcomes (Schmader, Major, and Gramzow, 2001). In a longitudinal research by Wong, Eccles and Sameroff (2003) to check the impact of discrimination on academic and psychological functioning, ethnic minority children who experienced discrimination from teachers and peers had lower self-concepts of academic ability, valued academic achievement less, had more mental difficulties, and lost the interest in education.

The World Bank (2009) reported that stereotyping and misconceptions about ethnic minority people were found to be negatively related to the educational attainment of ethnic minority students in the context of Vietnam. According to the World Bank (2009), stereotyping may lead to negative consequences on ethnic minorities, especially their self-esteem and self-confidence resulting in limited participation in the society.

A joint research of Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, UNICEF and UNESCO (2008) discovered that low self-esteem and confidence were among the numerous difficulties that prevented ethnic minority girls' transition from primary to secondary education. Ethnic minority girls were too shy, timid and embarrassed to communicate in the educational environment. The joint research found that the perception of the value of education was another factor hindering girls of ethnic minorities in accessing higher education, and it was associated with cultural practices, cost of schooling, and expectations of educational outcomes. When the schooling is costly and the outcomes are not realistic, people may question the value of education in terms of immediate survival and economic outcomes.

**Background:** The latest national census by General Statistics Office in 2009 shows the population of Vietnam at 86,024,600 with ethnic minorities accounting for around 14.5% of it. Among 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam, ethnic Kinh is viewed as the majority and others are classified as ethnic minorities. The 54 ethnic minority groups classification has been widely accepted and used in schools and propagated by media since 1979 (Pham Ngoc Chien, 2005). The ethnic classification in Vietnam was undertaken largely on the basis of its usage in the Soviet Union and China (World Bank, 2009). In Vietnam's Draft Ethnic Law, determining the ethnic group was based on three criteria: language, material life and culture, and ethnic consciousness. In case there was no distinct language, an ethnic group could be identified if it had its own culture and ethnic awareness. Two indispensable elements of ethnic composition were culture, and ethnic consciousness. The classification no longer includes territory and economic life as identifying factors

for ethnic composition though they used to be considered in identifying the ethnic composition in Vietnam and in the Soviet Bloc (Pham Ngoc Chien, 2005).

The ethnic Kinh in Vietnam is assumed to have more advantages in accessing infrastructure, financial and health services, education and modern technology. They are supposed to have more political and economic power than other ethnic groups (Imai and Gaiha, 2007). The ethnic minorities, with their residential territory mostly located in remote, isolated, and rural areas, face more difficulties and challenges in accessing basic necessities of life such as electricity, roads, education, financial services and healthcare (World Bank, 2009). Ethnic minorities in Vietnam enjoy lower socio-economic advantages and living standards because they live in less productive areas characterized by difficult terrain with less access to good infrastructure, market economy and finance. They have fewer off-farm job opportunities and lower educational achievement (Wall and Gunewardena, 2000).

Lam Dong is a southern mountainous province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The number of ethnic minority groups living in the province in 2009 was 39 with 256,974 people accounting for 21.7% of the population. Out of the ethnic minority population, 71.7% were residential ethnic minorities or had their origins in the Central Highlands (Lam Dong Statistical Office, 2009). The targeted ethnic groups assessed for this study were the three largest indigenous ethnic groups in the province namely Coho, Ma and Chu-ru. They accounted for 68.7% of the ethnic minority population of the province and shared many identical characteristics such as residential areas, economic conditions, and some traditional custom practices.

Ethnic minority students in Vietnam are represented in greater number at lower levels of education but decrease rapidly at higher levels. In addition, they experience higher illiteracy rates, lower educational attainments, and higher school dropout as well as grade repeating rates. Motivation is one of the significant reasons leading to lower educational performance of ethnic minority children (Ormrod, 2006). As educational motivation plays such a significant role in the academic success of students, this paper explores the factors influencing educational motivation and thereby preventing ethnic minority students in Lam Dong Province from gaining higher educational attainments.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research method with semi-structured in-depth interviews, informal conversations, group discussions and observations was applied for the research. These qualitative techniques allowed the research issues to be explored in their natural settings and contexts considering social roles, images, identities and other cultural elements (Kalof, Dan and Dietz, 2008). The research was carried out in 2010 in the provincial capital city and three other districts of Lam Dong Province, Vietnam.

Purposeful sampling with maximum variation techniques was used to select the respondents at the sites. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to access information-rich cases for in-depth studying (Patton, 1990), and helps researchers in searching for informants with specific knowledge on the investigated topics (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006). Using the maximum variation sampling technique, the research was able to include a wide selection of informants with different perspectives and a wide range of characteristics.

The participants comprised of ethnic minority students at lower and upper secondary levels and ethnic minority children who had given up their education at secondary levels within the last three years and still were at the age of schooling. Other research informants included some ethnic minority students at tertiary education, ethnic minority parents, teachers, local administrators, and community leaders.

Before conducting the interviews, discussions and observations, those in charge of an authority such as school principals, family heads, homeroom teachers, and other participants were asked for consent and permission to conduct the field research in their schools or with their children, at the school campuses or in participants' houses. They were also informed about the purposes of the research and their rights to withdraw from the research anytime they wanted.

The overall aims of the research were to investigate the perceptions of ethnic minority children and their parents towards education and explore the causes leading to lower educational attainment among ethnic minority children. A total of thirty-nine individual interviews and group discussions were conducted. Additional informal discussions and observations were used to support and confirm the results gained from interviews and discussions. Interview questions, discussion topics and observations were developed based on the identified themes from the review of literature. During the interviews, probe questions were raised based on the response of the informants to expand the understanding of the issues. The themes of interviews, discussions, and observations focused on the difficulties and challenges that ethnic minority students faced in accessing education. Their responses to these difficulties, their perceptions towards education, and their suggested solutions for better academic achievement arose in the course of their answers. Interviews and group discussions were recorded based on the consent of the research participants. Where recording was not possible, field notes were taken.

A list of potential participants was created at the sites with the help of the people who knew the participants. Following the list, the researcher met the participants on the school campuses or at participants' houses to conduct interviews in the presence of local teachers or university students who also belonged to local ethnic minorities or lived in the communes. As ethnic minority people's social lives are normally limited within their living communes or their ethnic communities, they may hesitate to express their perceptions to strangers. The assistance of local teachers or ethnic minority university students who share the same ethnic groups and are familiar with the informants helped the informants to have more confidence and trust in expressing their own opinions.

After the interviews had been conducted, all the data were transcribed and coded. Transcriptions were closely examined to elicit underlying themes and for a comparison of similarities and differences, and research items relevant to ethnic minority students' motivation and its impact on educational achievement of ethnic minority students were picked up.

## Findings and Discussion

***Lack of belief in the value of education:*** According to Chavous et al. (2003), students having positive attitudes towards education believe that education is meaningful, relevant and related to their future success. Such positive attitudes will help them to engage and persist more in education, have higher completion rates, and pursue further education. The majority of ethnic minority households in this study lived in poverty and had to struggle for the basic needs of their daily life. They considered the benefits and value of education in terms of jobs and income needed to escape from hunger and poverty. However, ethnic minority people perceived education as failing to meet their expectations. They hardly believed that education could be of any value. A male teacher with ten years of teaching experience at a secondary school and close relationships with ethnic minority students said:

“Ethnic minority students do not believe in the value of education. They do not believe that education will bring benefits to their lives. Some students said to me that they wanted to study but graduation would not bring any change. They must return to farming while others who dropped out of school early have already got married and have better lives.”

Lam Dong is a rural province in which 46.9% of the gross economic output in 2010 came from agriculture and 62.3% of the total working population in 2010 worked in agriculture, forestry and fishing (Lam Dong Statistical Office, 2012). As off-farm jobs are limited, to have a job an individual needs other skills and conditions than academic skills and certificates. Several ethnic minority parents revealed in group discussions that they needed social status, close connections with authorities, or the financial ability to obtain jobs for their children. Some parents thought that investment in their children’s further schooling at tertiary level would be a loss:

“If they go to college or university to study, they need to stay far from home; the cost will be higher and we cannot afford it. Some families here took bank loans or sold their farmland to support their children’s tertiary education. After graduation, they could not find jobs and could not pay back the bank loans. They had to return to the farming jobs, but they did not have their farmland anymore.”

Ethnic minorities commonly live in remote and mountainous areas, participate less in social activities, and have limited access to positions in the local government. Thus, they inevitably have less social status and limited connections. These bring them more difficulties and challenges in looking for jobs.

***Inadequate career orientation:*** Career limitations and difficulties also exerted influences on ethnic minority children’s career goals and their educational plans. Data from interviews indicated that children of ethnic minorities did not have clear plans for their future careers or education. Their choices of future careers did not require a high level of education. They showed a preference to low skilled careers such as driving, motorbike repairing or gardening.

Some local teachers said that ethnic minority students commonly did not have clear ideas for their future. They normally managed to finish high school level, stayed home with their parents, participated in the family’s farm work, and then got married. Although some students did have dreams of future careers, they thought that it was quite impossible for them to pursue those dreams. What they expected was simply to know how to read and write the national language.

Some children of low-income families undervalued education because of their economic difficulties. Children from well-off families did not consider education to have higher value either, because according to them education was not necessary; if their families had big farmlands, they would have comfortable lives without education.

Schools do have career orientation programs for students but they are not well organized. Students do not know what to do if they cannot afford tertiary education. Students feel confused in selecting areas of studies or institutions for their vocational or tertiary education. A local teacher expressed his concern about the career guidance at schools saying that the career guidance should do more to help students in the region by giving them get clear ideas about their future careers.

***Lack of confidence and belief in the function of the educational system:*** The school system is believed to have either a negative or a positive influence on students’ attitudes towards their education. A good

educational system can stimulate its students to be more engaged in their schooling. Vietnam's national educational system is seen as an examination-oriented competition. An ethnic minority informant explained:

“To do well at school is not an easy job and we almost have no time to practice. The programs are not updated. They do not create the feeling of excitement and motivation to acquire knowledge but only to cram knowledge into students' heads. We learn so much knowledge but we do not know what this knowledge is for and how to apply it in reality.”

The quality of education in Vietnam is considered backward and fails to meet the needs of society. Education has lost the confidence of society. The quality of the college degree, masters or doctorate is being questioned. Some local governments officially refuse to recruit students graduating from several modes of the educational system including in-service training or continuing education. A teacher informant explained why her students did not believe in the function of the educational system:

“The pressure of getting high achievement in education is very high. Teachers are forced to give their students good marks to show high performance and to meet the pre-planned targets. The problems of false teaching, false learning and false degrees have become more and more prevalent. Students do not know what to do with their knowledge gained at school after graduating.”

***Low parental engagement and low aspiration towards children's schooling:*** Family backgrounds have strong influences on children's motivation for schooling especially when parents have positive attitudes and high aspirations for their children's education (Coleman et al., 1966; White, 1982; Eldering, 1997). Children coming from families that put high value on education will have higher motivation for education. Parents who are more assimilated in the society, better integrated into the labor market, better educated and higher capable in the national language are more positive about their children's education (Eldering, 1997). Aldous (2006) shares the same arguments when indicating that parental occupation is a positive factor affecting children's educational attainments. Furthermore, children perform better in their education if they have aspirations towards education and get support from their parents.

Most of the parent informants interviewed agreed that education is necessary for their children. They hoped that education could help their children to be literate and have off-farm jobs in the future. They said that they felt sad and despair when their children got poor educational attainments or were reported to violate school regulations. They added that removing their children from school was their last choice. Usually, conditions beyond their ability or their children's wishes terminated schooling of their children. Although they realized that education was important and necessary for their children, they did not know what to do to help their children to have better educational attainments. Some even neglected their children's education. They thought that educating children was the schools' duty and teachers' work. What they had to do or could do was to send their children to school and pay the school fees. They normally did not check their children's learning and could not help their children in home assignments.

Some parents never attended the regular teacher-parent meetings. In some cases when the teachers went to convince the parents to let their children to continue their education, the answers were:

“Never come here again. He (the student) does not want to go to school. It is useless. He does not want to study. Let him stay at home. We have a big farmland.”

Some parents encouraged their children to drop out of school to help families in the farm work. These parents believed it was good if students dropped out of school and did something to help the families:

“Going further to tertiary education costs a lot of money. We cannot afford it. They should stay home to find jobs. If they continue their study, they still cannot find jobs after graduation. However, during this time if they stay home they can make much money.”

There were several reasons for the low engagement of ethnic minority parents in their children’s schooling. Poverty prevented some households from affording the school fees and other school expenses. Also ethnic minority people lived in remote and isolated areas and the isolation made them value education as less important. Low off-farm job opportunities made education seem as not having direct benefits. Furthermore, the average level of education of the ethnic minority adults was low; most of them did not finish elementary level of education, so they themselves undervalued education and thought basic literacy was sufficient.

***Peer teasing and inducement:*** A close and positive relationship with peers can create a great source of motivation. A negative one or discrimination by the majority to the minority students, on the other hand, can discourage ethnic minority students from active engagement in educational activities. Ogbu’s theory on strong ethnic identity and educational attainments claims that ethnic minorities may have oppositional attitudes towards what is considered as belonging to dominant groups. When the culture is different, children’s schooling may be influenced. Students may not perform well academically because they do not want their ethnic peers to identify them with dominant ethnic group members (Ogbu, 2004, 2008). Fordham & Ogbu (1986) believe that such identification has a negative impact blocking them from gaining high academic success, because children with good educational attainments are considered as “acting white” and less loyal to their peers. These stereotypes of thinking can have negative results in school and lessen children’s aspirations for good educational achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007).

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam have been seen as backward, less developed and less civilized than the majority by the majority-centered worldview (World Bank, 2009). These misconceptions and stereotyping has led to negative attitudes of the majority students towards their ethnic minority peers. There are reports of students being teased or insulted for their different appearance, for their lack of fluency in Vietnamese, for their lower educational attainments, or for their more physical maturation.

An ethnic minority student of upper secondary school admitted that ethnic minority girls in her class were teased by classmates because they were more physically mature. Ethnic minority students live far from the commune centers so they normally enter school at older ages. They normally attend the first class at seven or eight years old. When reaching lower and upper secondary schools, they are more physically developed than others in their classes. This makes them feel embarrassed and less confident.

There was not any evidence of peer pressure during the fieldwork. There was not a single case reported by students that they were forced by their friends to lower their own education achievement or to give up schooling. However, cases of inducement from out-of-school students to within-school students were reported. As they did not put high value in education, within-school children were less eager for education, and easily followed their out-of-school friends to join some other activities rather than attending schools. Children could help their families in the farm work after giving up school. Furthermore, they could work on land, spray insecticide or water the coffee plantations for others and earn around VND 100,000 a day (1 USD was equal to 19,494 VND in August 2010). As a result, they had money to buy new clothes or footwear, play billiards or go to coffee shops. Those who were in school but had low educational performance thought that dropping out of school would be more beneficial and enjoyable.



**Limited teacher–student relationships:** Teachers’ stereotyped views, negative attitudes and low expectations are some of the factors affecting the ethnic minority students’ educational attainment. Teachers’ negative attitudes may lead to less favorable treatment and less communication with their students. This makes the students have lower academic motivation and self-esteem. Consequently, they underachieve in their educational attainment (Foster, 1992). Several local teachers admitted that some teachers showed biased behavior towards ethnic minority students. This was expressed in class interactions. Teachers paid less attention to ethnic minority students. Some even abandoned ethnic minority students. They required the students to sit silently in the class without giving them any attention. The abandoned students gradually felt disgusted with school, hardly participated in the class activities, got poor educational performance, felt being discriminated and eventually dropped out. The problems between students and teachers existed due to the physical and social distance among teachers and students, differences in cultural sensitivity, lack of extra-curricular activities, and lack of encouragement and praise from teachers.

In interviews, students revealed that they did not have cordial relationships with their teachers. They could not share their ideas and their feelings with their teachers. They rarely interacted with their teachers outside the classrooms. There were not many social activities for students and teachers to join. In class, teachers often criticized and scolded whenever students were late for school, did not prepare for lessons, disturbed other students during the lessons, and had poor examination scores.

**Further discussion:** Education has a well-established link with life outcomes, and can enhance life satisfaction and well-being (Chavous et al., 2003). However, each individual may have different perceptions of education, may value education differently, may place different emphasis on educational goals, belief and interests, and may differently invest time and energy to gain high educational achievement. The question of how to motivate students to concentrate on education, work purposefully and learn for the sake of their own benefits has been raised by Bentley (1998). According to him, students may believe that school cannot prepare them for their lives. Bentley (1998) argues that education fails in its main purpose of preparing students to face the challenges in their life. Education just teaches knowledge to the students but does not teach them how to learn and fails to equip students with what they need for their future.

Motivation is among the most influential determinants affecting students’ schooling performance (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) and the heart of teaching and learning process (Maehr & Meyer, 1997). Ormrod (2006) highlights the influences of educational motivation on the way students behave towards their learning.

As noted by Vygotskian, the academic failure or success of any child or any ethnic minority group is not caused by the characteristics existing in the child or in the ethnic minority group, but is based on historical and social conditions. Moreover, educational success cannot be considered as the outcome of educational sector alone. Educational success is a process that requires the contributions of multiple activity settings in which children are involved. When a child or a group of children fail in academic achievement, this failure can be considered as a systemic failure. It is not the failure of any individual or a group of individuals. It is the failure of the society in creating the appropriate conditions for effective learning (Trueba, 1988). Thus, the problems of low school motivation and low educational attainment of ethnic minority students in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam, were not the fault of students themselves but may represent the systemic failure arising from many factors related to families, the educational system and the society.

## Conclusion

The research findings showed that numerous factors had an influence on the academic motivation of ethnic minority students. The first and foremost explanation for inadequate academic motivation of ethnic minority students was the lack of a belief in the value of education. Ethnic minority people perceived education as failing to meet their expectations, that education was hardly meaningful, relevant and related to their future success. Secondly, career orientation did not provide students with sufficient information for a future career or education after finishing secondary education.

Another cause for low educational motivation of students was the lack of confidence and belief in the function of the educational system. The national educational system was seen as an examination-oriented competition based on theories but not practical. Students felt they did not know what to do with such knowledge and how to apply this knowledge in reality. They lost their confidence and belief in the function of the educational system.

Many cases in the interviews and discussions showed that ethnic minority students rarely interacted with teachers and were less likely to express their ideas in classes. Some were reported to sit silently in class without doing anything. They did not disturb others, but also did nothing much either, such as taking notes, listening to teacher, or giving responses when being called upon. Moreover, ethnic minority children seemed to be quite satisfied with their mediocre performance at school. They felt bored with educational programs and for them knowing how to read and write was sufficient and education did not bring any benefit or value.

Low engagement and low esteem of ethnic minority parents towards their children's schooling was therefore another reason affecting the educational motivation of ethnic minority students as parents' positive attitudes and high aspirations on their children's schooling were found to be closely associated with students' academic performance. Living in poverty, in remote and isolated areas, and in low paying off-farm jobs with low levels of education could explain the low engagement of ethnic minority parents in their children's schooling.

Peer teasing and inducement also contributed to the low educational motivation of ethnic minority students. Ethnic minority students reported to be teased or insulted for their different appearance, for their lack of fluency in Vietnamese, for their lower educational attainments, or for their more physical maturation.

A limited teacher–student relationship was another possible explanation for low academic motivation of ethnic minority students in this study. The limited relationship was due to the physical and social distance between teachers and students, differences in cultural sensitivity, lack of extra-curricular activities, and lack of encouragement and praise from teachers. Factors affecting educational motivation of ethnic minority students in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam are explained in detail in the following sections.

To summarize, the educational underachievement of ethnic minority children at secondary levels of Lam Dong Province was associated with many factors among which the lack of motivation for educational achievement was one of the primary factors. Undervaluing education and lacking educational belief, goals and interests in education were some of the reasons for poor educational performance that might have been the result of limited outcomes of education, parental perceptions and their lack of engagement in their children's education, and the attitudes of teachers and majority students towards ethnic minority students. Consequently, ethnic minority students get bored with classes easily, are less motivated for higher achievement, participate in school activities passively, hesitate to review and prepare for schoolwork, and are more likely to give up school when feeling ashamed because of low educational attainments or repeating classes.

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