



Research Paper

The imprint of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools on the development of education in Vietnam's ethnic minority areas

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the roles and achievements of the semi-boarding ethnic minority school system in advancing education in ethnic minority areas over the past 60 years. Drawing on its historical establishment and development, the study highlights the outstanding contributions of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in expanding educational opportunities, maintaining student enrollment, fostering students' holistic development, and preserving ethnic cultural identity. Evidence from reports of the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Training demonstrates the effectiveness of the semi-boarding ethnic minority school model while also highlighting current difficulties and challenges. On this basis, several solutions are proposed to further strengthen the role of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in the new period, aiming toward equity, quality, and sustainable development in education for ethnic minority areas.

Keywords: Education, ethnic minority areas, semi-boarding with community support, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the 80-year development process of Vietnam's revolutionary education foundation, ethnic education has always received attention from the Party and the State, especially for the development of specialized schools in ethnic minority areas, including semi-boarding ethnic minority schools.

Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, with their predecessor being the "semi-boarding with community support" school model, have been established and developed since the 1960s of the previous century. Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools were officially recognized when the National Assembly promulgated the Education Law on 14 June 2005; followed by the Law on amending and supplementing some articles of the Education Law on 15 December 2009, and currently the Education Law 2019. In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Training issued the Regulations on the Organization and Operation of this Type of School.

Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools were established to meet practical demand and are now an important part of the national education system, developing strongly in ethnic minority areas. This school model has overcome the challenges posed by complex terrain and difficult transportation, which prevent some students from returning home daily and force them to stay at school or in homestays. By being organized in the education, meals, and accommodation at the school, students can focus on their studies, ensuring equitable access to education. At the same time, their parents can feel secure about their children, strengthening the community's trust in the policies of the Party and the State.

Looking back on the journey, the development history of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools has achieved many successes. However, there are still challenges such as difficult infrastructure, overlapping regimes and policies, and unsecured teaching staff quality... To improve the operational efficiency of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, a synchronous solution is needed at both the central and local levels, involving multiple ministries and sectors, to address challenges and ensure equitable access to education for ethnic minority students.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a retrospective literature review method by summarizing information and data from reports of the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities and Religions, Ethnic Council, school year summary reports, school

year statistics of the Ministry of Education and Training, summary reports of science and technology subjects, and some websites of the Government, Ministries /Departments of Education and Training... that provided reliable information and data, reflecting the history of formation and development of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, clarifying the role, achievements, as well as the existing problems and difficulties of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools.

III. RESULTS

3.1. Formation and development process of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools

- *Period of 1945 - 1954*: Beginning in the context of the resistance war, the tasks of education in general were to eradicate illiteracy and expand the intellectual standards of the people. In ethnic minority areas, students had almost no opportunity to go to school. With the revolutionary government focusing on opening literacy classes, a few classes were organized in ethnic minority areas from the movement to spread the national language, giving rise to schools in the base areas, creating a foundation for the formation of various types of schools in ethnic minority areas later.

- *Period of 1954 - 1975*: The tasks of education were to consolidate the network of schools in ethnic minority areas, implementing the policy of "learning together, fighting together". Ethnic education during this period faced many difficulties. Faced with this situation, cadres and teachers in remote areas developed many good practices and valuable experiences. One of these creations was the "semi-boarding with community support" school model, which emerged in the 1960s, starting with bundles of firewood, kilograms of rice, and, especially, the change in people's awareness, gradually helping to remove the difficulties of education in ethnic minority areas and overcoming that period.

- *Period of 1975 - 1986*: After the reunification of the country, the demand for universal education increased sharply, so the network of schools in disadvantaged areas received more attention. The task set for ethnic education was to expand boarding and semi-boarding schools for ethnic minorities, ensuring learning opportunities for students in mountainous and remote areas. Some localities organized "semi-boarding with community support" schools and "district/commune-level semi-boarding" schools so that students could feel secure to stay, eat, and study at the school.

- *Period of 1986 - 2000*: In the early 1990s, when the whole country was implementing the national goal of universal primary education, the model of primary schools with semi- boarding students developed rapidly and strongly in many provinces to mobilize students from difficult areas to go to school and complete primary education. The demand of compatriots for voluntarily sending their children to "learn" increased. This was the main reason why the "semi-boarding with community support" school model became increasingly necessary, initially forming a widespread network and developing strongly in the following years. In this period, the Government pursued a policy to consolidate and develop schools in ethnic minority areas, promulgated policies to support ethnic minority students, and laid the legal foundation for the semi-boarding ethnic minority school model.

- *Period of 2000 - 2010*: Completing the system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in the Education Law 2005 and by-law documents; improving quality, linking to the goals of equity and integration. Since 2000, the number of "semi-boarding with community support" students has steadily increased. In the school year 2008-2009, there were nearly 145,000 students, mainly concentrated in the mountainous provinces of North and North Central Regions¹.

- *Period of 2010 - now*: The Education Law 2019, Decrees, and Circulars have specifically regulated the organization and operation of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools. This is a period when the system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools has seen significant progress and rapid development, with thousands of schools in mountainous provinces and hundreds of thousands of students enrolled, playing an important role in maintaining universal education and improving the quality of education in ethnic minority areas.

3.2. Roles of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools for education in ethnic minority areas

Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are established by the State for ethnic minority students and students from families permanently residing in areas with extremely disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, aiming to contribute to equal access to education for ethnic minorities and people in mountainous areas. Currently, the system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools operates and is organized in accordance with Circular No. 03/2023/TT-BGDDT dated 06 February 2023 of the Ministry of Education and Training, which promulgates the Regulations on the organization and operation of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools. Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are usually built in the central areas of communes; however, most semi-boarding students live

¹ <https://baochinhphu.vn/mo-hinh-ban-tru-dan-nuoi-can-duoc-nhan-rong-1028928.htm>

far from the school, making transportation inconvenient. The general structure of a semi-boarding ethnic minority school consists of three areas: learning area, administrative area, and semi-boarding area with living rooms, kitchen, toilet, vegetable garden, playground, and practice field... meeting basically for students in terms of learning, accommodation, and organizing activities at the semi-boarding ethnic minority school.

In the development process of education in ethnic minority areas, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have demonstrated the following basic roles:

- Expanding access to education for ethnic minority students

The system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools helps ethnic minority students in remote areas and those facing transportation difficulties due to distance, terrain, and weather by providing opportunities to attend school, study, and live on campus. At the semi-boarding school, teachers can monitor students' studies more frequently, assess their study ability, and have the opportunity to help each student. Because they eat, live, and study on-site, and communicate, meet friends and teachers regularly, they have more opportunities to speak the common language. Studying and living at school not only helps students focus on their studies and feel secure in their lives, but also helps reduce the dropout rate. The widespread distribution of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in communes and the "semi-boarding with community support" model reaching even remote villages is a way to gather and attract students to school, expand opportunities to access to education for students, and simultaneously increase the rate of mobilizing students to school, improve attendance rate of students, and reduce dropout rate of students, especially at the secondary level, contributing to improving the quality of education in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, bringing them closer to the common quality of the whole country.

- Preserving and promoting ethnic culture

Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are multicultural educational environments where each student carries within them the cultural characteristics of their ethnic group. Therefore, focusing on teaching and learning in Vietnamese and the mother tongue, and integrating activities to preserve cultural identity, such as incorporating historical elements, customs, festivals, costumes, cuisine, and traditional musical instruments into subjects and educational activities, is highly valued by semi-boarding ethnic minority schools. These activities aim to provide students with basic knowledge and understanding of traditional culture, thereby fostering love, pride, and attachment to the ethnic communities in their homeland, while contributing to the preservation and promotion of the cultural identity of ethnic minorities.

- Forming a comprehensive educational environment

While studying at semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, students participate in educational activities in accordance with the regulations in the Charter of the general education school charter and specific educational activities that form a comprehensive educational environment to attract them to useful activities, gradually changing outdated thoughts and customs, and creating the right learning motivation for students. Specific educational activities for students in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools include: (i) Being propagandized and educated on the ethnic guidelines and policies of the Party and State; (ii) Being educated on life skills, gender and gender equality; educated on environmental protection; educated on cleaning the school, classrooms, and accommodation areas; (iii) Being enhanced Vietnamese language; (iv) Participating in organizing cultural, artistic, and sports activities; visit and cultural exchange; (v) Being organized collective cooking to ensure hygiene and food safety; and health care; (vi) Being provided with meals, accommodation, and living in the boarding area and entitled to regimes and policies in accordance with the regulations of the State. With a comprehensive educational environment, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools help train high-quality human resources, meeting the requirements of socio-economic development in ethnic minority areas.

- Demonstrating the humanistic nature of education policy

Born out of practical needs and institutionalized during the country's development, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have become a prominent feature of humanistic education policies. They help narrow the gap and ensure equal access to knowledge for children of ethnic minorities. Policies for these schools demonstrate the State's comprehensive concern in many areas, such as: support for semi-boarding students (rice, accommodation, enrollment assistance), investment in building infrastructure and equipment, and regimes for teachers and staff (allowances, travel, rotation, training, and development). These policies have transformed the schools' appearance, provided conditions for organizing teaching and semi-boarding, made teachers feel secure in their work, shared the cost burden with students' parents, helped students focus on their studies, decreased dropout rates, lowered the number of children out of school, and reduced child marriage among ethnic minority girls. Notably, the number of disabled children from ethnic minorities attending school through semi-boarding programs has increased in recent years.

3.3. Outstanding achievements of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in the education development in ethnic minority regions

- The scale of schools and students increased in quantity

The scale of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools is increasingly expanding, and the number of students is steadily increasing, especially since 2010. The data summarized from the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities and Religions and the Ministry of Education and Training clearly demonstrated this.

Table 1. The scale of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools and students

School year	Number of schools	Number of students
2010 - 2011	127	-
2011 - 2012	403	-
2013 - 2014	797	128,645
2015 - 2016	1,013	159,212
2016 - 2017	1,148	207,326
2017 - 2018	1,259	219,728
2018 - 2019	1,225	230,280
2019 - 2020	1,124	237,608
2021 - 2022	1,139	About 250,000
2023 - 2024	1,213	About 300,000

- The network of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools covers all mountainous and disadvantaged provinces

Localities with many semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are concentrated in the Northern Midlands and mountainous region, such as: Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, Phu Tho, Tuyen Quang, Lao Cai, Son La, Dien Bien, and Lai Chau, due to the complex and fluctuating natural conditions throughout the year, and the daily attendance at the schools of students meets many difficulties. In addition, provinces in the Central region, such as Nghe An, Quang Tri, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, and Lam Dong, also have semi-boarding ethnic minority schools; however, the number is not as large as in provinces in the Northern Midlands and mountainous region.

- The quality of education is gradually improving.

The development of a system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools contributes to raising the quality of education in extremely disadvantaged socio-economic regions. From a situation where schools mainly mobilized students to go to school, with the percentage of good and excellent students being “can be counted on one hand”, the number of students attending regularly and the percentage of good and excellent students have now increased rapidly.

According to reports from the Ministry of Education and Training, students’ study results have shown positive changes. Most provinces in ethnic minority areas with semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have achieved high enrollment rates in primary and secondary education, often exceeding 95-98%. Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have increased student attendance rates and decreased dropout rates, contributing to maintaining universal education outcomes and universal primary and secondary education at the appropriate age. The learning of Vietnamese and activities to enhance Vietnamese proficiency for ethnic minority students in semi-boarding schools have contributed to improving Vietnamese language proficiency, increasing the percentage of students using Vietnamese in their studies, and making it easier for them to absorb knowledge and apply it in their lives.

Along with improving the quality of teaching, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have received investment from the Party, State, and localities in infrastructure such as classrooms, canteens, semi-boarding houses, libraries, and teaching equipment... which are increasingly more perfect, solid, and spacious, contributing to changing the appearance of the schools and ensuring the conditions for teaching and semi-boarding accommodation. At the same time, the teaching staff is also increasingly ensured in number and better in quality, with many teachers being added, many young teachers volunteering to go to disadvantaged areas, and many dedicated, creative, and active teachers in teaching... these are important pieces in improving the quality of education in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools.

- Contributing to human resource development in ethnic minority regions

The quality of education in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools has gradually improved each year, improving education in ethnic minority and mountainous regions and contributing to a gradual rise in intellectual levels and the development of human resources in the locality. The percentage of semi-boarding students continuing their education in high school, boarding ethnic minority schools, continuing education, and vocational training centers is increasing and shows a trend of growth in many ethnic minority areas. Among them, many students from semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have grown up and, after graduating from university or college, become commune cadres and teachers who return to serve their hometowns.

- *Creating trust of ethnic communities in the guidelines and policies of the Party and the State.*

Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools were established to address inequality in education, helping ethnic minority students and students in disadvantaged areas access to education, while contributing to sustainable development in mountainous ethnic regions. The concern and investment of the Party and the State in education in general, and in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in particular, through a series of policies - including student support policies - have reduced the burden of study costs for many students' families, helping their parents feel secure about their children's studies and living, and creating trust of ethnic communities in the guidelines and policies of the Party and the State.

3.4. Some difficulties and shortcomings of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools

- *The policy system is not synchronic; it is difficult to implement the policies*

Currently, some policies supporting ethnic minority education in general and semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in particular lack consistency in their content, especially regarding the level of support, duration of support, form of support, and subjects of support. For example, Decree No. 57/2017/ND-CP provides a 12-month enjoyment period, while Decree 116/2016/ND-CP and, currently, Decree No. 66/2025/ND-CP provide only a 9-month enjoyment period during a school year. Some regimes for students in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools only basically meet the minimum requirements for students in ethnic minority areas...

- *Infrastructure is limited and uneven*

Although semi-boarding ethnic minority schools have received concern and investment in building the classrooms, canteens, kitchens, playgrounds, sports fields, and other auxiliary works to meet the minimum demand for teaching - learning, nurturing, and caring for semi-boarding students, some schools still lack land fund for construction and supplement of works items to serve educational activities, affecting the improvement of teaching quality in general and the organization of semi-boarding activities in particular. Some semi-boarding schools lack canteens or kitchens that ensure food safety and hygiene standards; some schools lack clean water, toilets, and student accommodation; the system of functional rooms is downgraded; and some equipment and supplies for semi-boarding students are damaged and not in sync.

Although they are called semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, their organization and operation are similar to those of boarding ethnic minority schools. However, they do not receive initial subsidies for supplies such as uniforms, backpacks, blankets, sheets, pillows, mattresses, mats, and mosquito nets. They also lack funds to buy bowls, chopsticks for students, and kitchen utensils for organizing semi-boarding activities. Because semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are often located in mountainous, remote, and extremely disadvantaged areas, educating students socially is difficult, leading to many challenges in organizing activities.

- *The teaching staff does not meet the demand in both quantity and quality*

The teaching staff in ethnic minority areas, in general, and in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools, in particular, remains insufficient to meet actual demand, especially in subjects such as English, Informatics, Music, and Fine Arts when implementing the 2018 general education program. A portion of teachers are still weak in professional skills and do not meet the training standards set by the regulations. The proportion of young teachers is high, but they often lack practical experience, thus limiting the mobilization of students to go to school; teachers are often not local people or ethnic minority groups, they have little cultural knowledge and lack ethnic language skills, thus limiting the implementation of educational tasks; they lack experience in communicating with parents; they lack understanding of ethnic cultural characteristics; and they do not know how to exploit indigenous knowledge and apply innovation of teaching methods and organization forms suitable for students in ethnic minority areas.

3.5. Orientation of solutions for developing semi-boarding ethnic minority schools

- Fully and promptly implement regimes and policies for students, teachers, and educational management cadres, while continuing to review and evaluate policies on quality, content, and implementation process... to improve the specific mechanisms and policies for ethnic education in general, and for semi-boarding ethnic minority schools in particular.

- Invest in and strengthen the system of semi-boarding ethnic minority schools towards national standard schools. Equip them fully with modern teaching equipment and classrooms, and synchronize the information technology infrastructure in the education sector to meet the requirements of digital transformation.

- Organize well the work of nourishing the semi-boarding students, focusing on: (i) Maintain a clean semi-boarding kitchen, provide sufficient nutrition, ensure food safety and hygiene, and equip fully with tools such as stainless steel bowls and chopsticks, and food sample storage cabinets; (ii) Improve the quality of accommodation, ensure a clean, airy, and light living environment for students; (iii) Ensure clean water sources for daily life and study, and provide medical examination for students in accordance with the regulations; (iv) Create spaces for healthy recreation and physical activities to help students develop comprehensively, such as providing sports areas and creating grounds for entertainment and recreation areas.

- Improve and build a team of capable teachers and educational managers who understand ethnic culture and meet the requirements of educational renovation. Organize the effective implementation of professional tasks to improve comprehensive educational quality in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools. Implement educational programs flexibly to suit students' learning conditions; connect education with the socio-economic development reality and cultural characteristics of the locality.

- Mobilize the participation of the community and local government in the school's education and other activities, such as: (i) Strengthen communication and exchange with families to coordinate the care and education of students; (ii) Organize activities to connect the school with the community and mobilize support resources from the locality; (iii) Strengthen the role of local government in proposing support policies to invest in and develop semi-boarding ethnic minority schools.

IV. CONCLUSION

The work of organizing teaching and learning in semi-boarding ethnic minority schools must always simultaneously carry out 2 tasks: teaching and learning, as in other general schools of the same level, in accordance with the regulations, and the implementation of specific educational activities. Semi-boarding ethnic minority schools are not only places for teaching literacy and human development, but also specific social organizations that contribute significantly to the strategy of sustainable development, educational equity, cultural preservation, and the consolidation of the solidarity bloc of ethnic groups. From the reality of investing in development and improving the quality of education models in ethnic minority and mountainous areas, it is shown that the semi-boarding ethnic minority school model has played a significant role in maximizing the enrollment of primary and secondary school students of school age, increasing attendance rate of students, reducing dropout rate of students, and improving the comprehensive education quality. However, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools also reveal difficulties and limitations that need to be overcome and renovated to meet the requirements of the new period. Besides some of the proposed solution orientations, semi-boarding ethnic minority schools need to promote the application of information technology, digital transformation, strengthen specific educational activities, connect with and exploit the potential of local intellectuals... to remove difficulties and overcome limitations to improve the quality of education, ensure equitable access to education for ethnic minority students, and continue to be a bright spot in the development of ethnic education.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard, written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the authors.

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