The Processes of Ethnic Identity Reconstruction among the Karen Ethnic Group in Galyani Vadhana District, Chiang Mai Province

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Abstract

This study endeavors to explore the ethnic identity reconstruction through practices implemented in Galyani Vadhana's schools. It aims to explore how cultural knowledge is developed in educational environments using the framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). It seeks to examine the methods used and offer insights into the knowledge and changes occurring within these communities. Employing qualitative methods, the research centers on two primary objectives: first, to examine the impact of CRP on promoting ethnicity identity reconstruction among Karen people including students, teachers and communities in the schools setting in Galyani Vadhana disrruct, Chiang Mai province; and second, to study the participation of Karen ethnic groups in educational institutions in fostering the reconstruction of Karen ethnic identities within schools. The key informants included teachers, students, and community members from a school at the study site. Data were collected through interviews and observations, then analyzed using a phenomenological approach.

The research underscores the importance of reconstructing ethnic identity among the Karen people, particularly within the educational context of Galyani Vadhana district. Collaboration between schools and the Karen communities is essential for fostering ethnic identity through a CRP. This approach involves developing a curriculum that aligns with community needs, embeds cultural values, and enhances the self-esteem of Karen students, teachers, and community members. By doing so, it reduces marginalization and preserve local heritage within the Thai education system. Second, active participation of the Karen ethnic group in educational institutions plays a significant role in promoting ethnic pride and identity reconstruction. The research suggests that increasing the representation of local Karen teachers, as opposed to Thai lowlander teachers who frequently relocate, could provide more continuity and cultural relevance in education. However, it is noted that ethnic minority teachers are underrepresented in the schools, partly due to the lack of emphasis on ethnic identity concepts in their teacher training programs. To address this gap, integrating multicultural education into university curricula for student teachers is essential for fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of ethnic identity within educational institutions.

Keywords: Culturally responsive pedagogy, Multicultural education, Ethnicity, Identity, Galyani vadhana

Introduction

The integration of cultural knowledge into educational institutions is one of the avenue to enable younger generations to recognize the importance of their national and ethnic identities. In its essence, Multicultural Education aims to foster inclusive learning environments where students from diverse cultural backgrounds feel respected, understood, and represented (Banks, 2010). Cultivating awareness among the new generation of ethnic communities involves fostering an understanding of differences and recognizing the importance and pride in their own ethnic identity, which serve as a potential solution to the identity crisis that often arises among the younger population. This crisis is characterized by a tendency to neglect their ethnic identity and strive towards a more generalized Thai identity which lead to an identity crisis. Consequently, when attempting to transition from their local communities to urban societies, these individuals find themselves unable to compete effectively in the Thai social milieu. Subsequently, upon returning to their original communities, they struggle to reconcile with their previous identity, facing difficulty aligning with their initial cultural identity. (Buadang, 2006)

However, the Thai government has not been cognizant of this crisis. The state significantly shapes national education, influencing curriculum, textbooks, access, and outcomes to instill knowledge aligned with societal ideals and a national identity. Historically, assimilation efforts aimed to integrate the central Thai language and supplanting local languages began in King Rama VI's era, which intensified patriotic indoctrination, confining identities within a Thai framework and suppressing non‑Thai identities. Measures enforcing the Thai language as the official and controlling information sources solidified this identity. Schools function as government instruments, molding individuals into a Thai‑centric identity through their curricula, cultural activities, and teacher‑led directives, reinforcing a singular national culture (Nawarat, 2008; Vaddhanaphuti, 2012; Winichakul, 2017). In rural areas of northern Thailand with diverse hill tribe communities like the Karen, younger generations gravitate towards modern, globally accepted values endorsed by the Thai state as "Thai-ness," drifting away from their ethnic identities and local cultures. This transition prioritizes a unified national identity, overshadowing individual diversity and marginalizing indigenous cultures. Ancient traditions and beliefs diminish in significance being challenged by modern influences, eroding traditional wisdom. State‑appointed teachers assimilate the younger generation into the Thai cultural framework through the educational system, diluting their ties to ancestral cultures. Schools, beyond their educational role, serve as arenas for power struggles and the transmission of diverse beliefs among teachers, students, and staff.

Even though most teachers follow directives received from the Thai state in instilling a sense of Thai identity in students, some educators aim to promote multiculturalism within schools, employing varied strategies such as diverse teaching methods, integrating local wisdom, and formulating inclusive policies. However, for these practices to be sustainable, schools cannot operate in isolation; they must receive cooperation from the surrounding community. Hence, "participation" is often highlighted as a discourse tool to develop school environments in the Galyani Vadhana district.

However, numerous projects in the past have been discontinued. This is due to the characteristic feature of Galyani Vadhana District as a "transit zone," where newly recruited teachers often reside for a short period, typically 2‑4 years, before relocating outside the area. As a result, the majority of practitioners are newcomers who often stay in the area for a brief period. In contrast, local residents who have been residing for an extended period are usually a minority and do not hold significant positions in schools. For this reason, various projects and initiatives within schools in Galyani Vadhana tend to be small-scale, short-lived endeavors

without sustained leadership (Field Note, interview with the principal, July 8, 2021) . Nevertheless, amidst the various short-lived projects, there is one particular space where the discourse of participation plays a central role in the development of both schools and communities, yielding successful outcomes and has been ongoing since 2013. The intriguing question arises as to why this school stands out, demonstrating successful practices in fostering a multicultural environment. There is a deeper significance beyond the mere adoption of the discourse of "participation," and the answer lies in the establishment of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), with schools serving as focal points ready to design curricula that meet the needs of the community. These needs include fostering pride and creating opportunities for youth in the local area through various teaching method and learning activities organized by both educational staffs and knowledgeable members of the cultural community spanning across the entire Galyani Vadhana district.

This research seeks to investigate the development of cultural knowledge within educational settings through the framework of CRP. It aims to analyze the methodologies employed and provide insights into the knowledge and transformations taking place within these communities. Additionally, the study explores how CRP can address the identity crisis prevalent in the region, identifies factors contributing to the discontinuation of multicultural education projects, and examines the impact of the transient nature of teaching staff on the sustainability and effectiveness of CRP in fostering ethnic identity among students. By filling this research gap, the study endeavors to enhance our understanding of how CRP can effectively facilitate the reconstruction of ethnic identity within educational institutions and the role of local communities in this process.

Research Objective

1. To examine the impact of CRP on promoting ethnicity identity reconstruction among Karen people including students, teachers and communities in the schools setting in Galyani Vadhana disrruct, Chiang Mai province.

2. To study the participation of Karen ethnic groups in educational institutions in fostering the reconstruction of Karen ethnic identities within schools.

Concepts and theories in conducting research

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is an educational approach that emphasizes the incorporation of students' cultural knowledge and backgrounds into teaching practices. By integrating local wisdom and cultural traditions into the curriculum, CRP aims to foster a strong sense of pride and identity among students, particularly in communities where traditional cultural identities are at risk of being diminished by dominant national or global influences. This approach not only enriches students' educational experiences but also plays a crucial role in preserving and reconstructing ethnic identities within educational institutions.

CRP stands as a pivotal framework in education, advocating for teaching methodologies that recognize and integrate students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Rooted in theories of multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and social justice, CRP aims to establish inclusive learning environments that empower a diverse student body. CRP draws upon a range of theoretical perspectives, including critical pedagogy, cultural competence, and constructivism. Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that CRP is deeply grounded in critical pedagogy, which urges educators to question power dynamics and societal norms within educational settings. Moreover, Gay (2010) underscores the significance of cultural competence, emphasizing educators' grasp of varied cultural backgrounds and their capacity to integrate culturally pertinent content into teaching practices. Constructivist theories further accentuate the importance of students' prior knowledge and experiences in shaping their

learning (Banks, 2015), aligning with CRP's emphasis on the valuation of students' cultural identities.

CRP embraces several guiding principles and strategies aimed at nurturing culturally inclusive classrooms. The development of culturally relevant curriculum entails the selection of materials and resources reflecting diverse perspectives and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Integrating culturally responsive teaching methods, such as cooperative learning, narrative approaches, and the incorporation of students' cultural strengths into instruction, fosters student engagement and academic achievement (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Additionally, establishing robust connections with students and their communities cultivates trust and fosters a supportive learning atmosphere (Howard, 2003). Research suggests that CRP can yield positive outcomes for student's learning. Scholarly investigations have demonstrated that culturally relevant instruction correlates with heightened academic achievement, enhanced attendance rates, and increased levels of engagement among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, CRP has been associated with augmented self-esteem and cultural appreciation among students, contributing to their overall well-being (Nieto, 2004).

While CRP holds promise, educators may encounter hurdles in its implementation. These challenges may encompass resistance to change, resource deficiencies, and inadequate training in culturally responsive methodologies (Milner, 2010). Addressing these obstacles necessitates ongoing professional development and support for educators, alongside systemic reforms within educational institutions to foster equity and inclusivity.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological design to explore the deeper meaning of the phenomenon beyond surface-level observations. The phenomenological approach centers on investigating individuals' lived experiences to uncover the essential structure of those experiences (Creswell, 2013). Instead of focusing on measurement or quantification, this method prioritizes understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences. Researchers provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences to capture the richness and complexity of their subjective realities (Van, 2014). Ultimately, the phenomenological approach offers valuable insights into individual experiences, deepening our understanding of human behavior, perceptions, and meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenon was explored by engaging with individual experiences within school settings in the Galyani Vadhana district. The study aimed to understand the process of reconstructing ethnicity using an analytical framework that involved collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data into contextual concepts. This approach seeks to address the research question of how CRP can help resolve the emerging identity crisis.

In this study, data collection methods comprised documentary research, involving the review of relevant literature, and field research, where data was gathered on-site through purposive sampling. The validity of the research instruments was confirmed using triangulation to ensure the data's accuracy.

The research data, collected from literature reviews and field research, will be analyzed qualitatively using Chai Pothisita's methodology (2016). The analysis process includes:

1. Data Organization: Arranging and categorizing information from observations, interviews, and documents to facilitate analysis.

2. Data Display: Presenting and linking the data systematically according to the analytical framework to interpret and narrate its significance.

3.   Conclusion, Interpretation, and Verification: Formulating conclusions and interpreting the findings, while also verifying the accuracy and reliability of the results.

Research area

This study investigates the phenomenon occurring at Sunshine School (a psedonym), located in the Galyani Vadhana district of Chiang Mai province. The contextual significance of this educational setting lies in its cultural diversity, with a predominant population of Karen ethnicity, followed by Hmong, and a small Thai minority. According to Buadang's research (2006), the area grapples with identity crisis among the younger generation, who strive to assimilate into Thai identity, gradually forsaking their ethnic heritage, leading to various community issues. In the past, several organizations attempted to address this problem, and many schools initiated short-term projects to meet community needs. However, many school projects often tend to be short-term initiatives and lack continuity, resulting in minimal tangible outcomes. Consequently, Sunshine School was purposively sampled to explore why it is one of the few schools capable of designing learning programs that cater to community needs in such a context.

Participant

This study involved educational staffs, students and stakeholder of Sunshine School as key informants. The informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on the research objectives (Phothisita, 2019). This study involved one principle (Thai), four teachers (3 Thai 1 Karen), four student teachers (Karen), two contract teachers (Karen), sixteen students (Karen), three business owners in school area (1 Thai 2 Karen), and five local villagers (5 Karen) as the key informants. The informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on specific criteria that aligned with the research objectives.

Data collection and data analysis

The quantitative data collection methods were used into two parts as follows:

1) Documentary research: The contextual conditions, historical backgrounds, issues, and processes that various agencies utilize to address problems in the Galyani Vadhana were studied in this research (Buadang, 2007; Ruethaikrim, 2013; Sitthikriangkrai et al., 2015). Additionally, the utilization of CRP processes is examined to elucidate the phenomena occurring within the research area.

2) Field Research: The key informants in the research area were engaged through observation and in-depth interviews. The interviews primarily focused on their attitudes and perspectives regarding their ethnicity, school activities, and how to manage learning methods integrating local wisdom and the concept of multicultural education. Additionally, the study examined the changes that occurred after the school collaborated with the community and other school networks to establish CRP, and how these changes influenced the ideologies and attitudes of the individuals interviewed. The phenomena were analyzed through observation and in-dept interview, and recorded details during the field process from May 2021-October 2021 and Follow up again in January 2023. The obtained responses will contribute to addressing both research questions. Inquiries regarding curriculum, teaching methods, attitudes, and observations of various activities will be analyzed to answer research question 1, which investigates how the process of using CRP reconstructs Karen identity. The in-depth questions concerning the participation and work practices of the teaching staffs will help find answers to research question 2 regarding the involvement of the ethnic group teacher cohort in the implementation of CRP in educational settings.

Results

The researcher discovered through on-site investigation that schools in the Galyani Vadhana district are actively using the "participation" discourse to reconstruct local ethnic identity. However, these efforts often lack continuity and tend to be short-term due to the transient nature of the educational staff, who typically stay for only 2-4 years. Long-term local teachers, who are usually underrepresented in decision-making roles, have limited influence on driving change.

To address this issue, a new principal initiated a project in 2013 that employed "participation" to engage the community. Initially, the project focused on small-scale cultural activities, such as wearing traditional attire and participating in community events. Over time, the school developed a CRP by integrating community members and local knowledge into the curriculum. They introduced vocational training in skills such as weaving and traditional music "Teh-Nah" and created income-generating opportunities for students through local and online sales of student-made products. The project has been ongoing since 2013 and has expanded to neighboring schools, highlighting the importance of community involvement, cooperation, and continuity. The principal's dedication, demonstrated by relocating permanently to the community, has significantly contributed to the project's success, establishing the principal as a valued community member rather than a transient outsider (Field Note, Interview with the Principal, July 8, 2021).

The impact of CRP on promoting ethnicity identity reconstruction among Karen people in the schools

From the observed phenomenon, the investigation results have shown that Sunshine School has undertaken the reconstruction of ethnic identity within the educational institution through the informal establishment of CRP in collaboration with the community and various organizations.

Sunshine School has chosen cultural knowledge as the primary domain for establishing CRP in the research area. The school's strategy involves finding a common ground between the community's desire to instill ethnic identity in the school and the Thai government's interest in controlling knowledge according to its agenda. The negotiation results in incorporating the curriculum desired by the villagers into school club hours and in Friday afternoon activities. This approach minimizes the school's need to modify the core curriculum received from the government. It also opens opportunities for the discourse of "participation" to play a role in engaging community members in curriculum design. The school provides opportunities for both the community and students to determine their learning objectives and presentations, in line with Ladson-Billings' assertion that CRP encompasses multiple principles and strategies aimed at fostering culturally inclusive learning environments. Developing a culturally resonant curriculum involves selecting educational materials and resources that reflect diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge sources originating from within the community. The school serves as a conduit to adapt these elements, fostering confidence and empowerment among students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

From the observed phenomenon, it is evident that the restoration of ethnic identity is not solely the result of collaboration from educational personnel in the school but also involves individuals from various sectors, including:

1. Educational personnel who serve as key operators, with the school principal leading the development of the school curriculum and coordinating with various agencies to provide knowledge in areas that school staff cannot adequately explain.

2. Students who participate in various activities jointly organized by the school and the community, exchanging knowledge with teachers through various activities. For example, students in the school prepare local meals, exchanging cooking methods between Thai and Karen cuisine.

3. The local community of Sunshine Village provides knowledge on weaving, with the female village chief serving as the main leader. They act as instructors, preparing necessary tools and equipment for weaving. On the male side, they take responsibility for sharing knowledge in rotational farming, building irrigation channels, and teaching local beliefs, including ceremonies such as Reak‑Kwan ceremonies, wrist tying ceremonies, and forest ordination ceremonies. They also facilitate communication for selling products with local businesses.

It was found that the policy of Sunshine School was changed in 2017, focusing on developing vocational skills for students, leading to the integration of indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum. This directly impacted the majority of teachers, who are Thai lowlanders, requiring them to learn about the local culture and adapt their teaching methods. Alongside, students sometimes became knowledge providers about their own cultural heritage to the teachers, fostering a sense of pride in themselves and changing their attitudes towards their ethnic identity to a more positive direction. This transformation was reinforced by community support, promoting the purchase of locally made products by students. Consequently, students gained pride in their craftsmanship and believed in the sustainability of their local knowledge to sustain their livelihoods. The community also benefited from participating in knowledge exchange with the school, allowing the transfer of indigenous wisdom to the younger generation.

The participation of Karen ethnic groups in fostering the reconstruction of Karen ethnic identities within schools.

Based on the researcher's data collection through in‑dept interview, it was found that the main actors involved were local villagers and local business owners who actively participated in designing policies and activities used in teaching and learning within schools. The key participants included village chiefs who served as community leaders, engaging in teaching weaving to female students and facilitating the provision of various equipment to the school, such as weaving machines and materials. Additionally, they coordinated with knowledgeable individuals from other communities to exchange learning experiences, fostering connections with other communities across the Galyani Vadhana region.

Local businesses have contributed to expanding opportunities for schools by accepting clothing and accessories produced by students to sell in local shops, as well as providing homestays available in the village. Regarding village temples, local religious leaders have played a role as spiritual guides in organizing religious ceremonies that incorporate the core beliefs and folklore of the Karen people, aiming to pass down stories, legends, and the history of the Karen people for younger generations to learn. There is also an exchange of knowledge with Wat Huay Bong, located in Wat Chan sub‑district, which has a CRP focused on indigenous cultural learning through cultural images and riddle.

However, despite receiving substantial cooperation from external communities, within the school itself, the indigenous community remains largely limited to a minority of teachers who participate in cultural exchange activities. Especially among student teachers from ethnic minority groups, their involvement is primarily limited to participating in learning activities rather than taking a leading role in disseminating their knowledge. These lack of participation mainly because the absence of multicultural education in their school years and they lack a deep cultural understanding compared to guest speakers and knowledgeable individuals from the Sunshine Village community.

Discussions

Through the study of the practice of reconstruction of ethnic identity within educational institutions, the significance of CRP was recognized in influencing the success of operations. This is achieved by utilizing participatory discourse aligning with the work of Buadang and Sitthikriangkrai, who examined operations and integrated the concept of participation into their research (Buadang, 2007; Sitthikriangkrai et al., 2011). It can be observed that addressing local problems and needs as the basis for operations has motivated community members to participate in various projects and initiatives. Therefore, it becomes imperative for educational institutions to develop curricula that are responsive to community needs as a foundation for initiating collaboration with the community. This collaboration serves as the basis for establishing CRP that will serve as the focal point for operations in the long term.

However, in educational institutions, there was the phenomenon show that ethnic minority teachers, who should ideally be leading these operations, have very limited involvement in activities. Most often, they merely carry out tasks assigned by the principal and handle simple tasks such as representing the school in coordinating with knowledgeable individuals in the community. The main reasoning is being from the same ethnic group, they share language and culture, which makes them more cooperative than involving Thai lowlanders in coordination efforts. However, when it comes to transmitting knowledge related to Karen culture, these teachers often act merely as supervisors, overseeing students' participation in activities led by external lecturers.

Through data collection via interviews with four student teachers, it was revealed that they are students from a university in Chiang Mai province, each with diverse backgrounds. However, they all share a commonality of being Karen ethnicities from various villages in the Chiang Mai province. They unanimously reported that the teacher training programs they underwent did not emphasize the importance of multicultural education or the incorporation of such curriculum elements. Instead, they primarily learned basic ethnic diversity concepts in only the social study courses. Furthermore, all four experienced identity crisis issues within their communities as well. For instance, in their villages, traditional cultural knowledge has gradually diminished, such as radio programs in Karen language disappearing, lack of inheritance of indigenous music like Teh-Nah, or even assimilating into Thai culture through marriage, language use, and adopting a lowlander lifestyle and abandoning the way of life that once coexisted with the forest. (Field Note, Interview on October 10, 2021)

This phenomenon was not exclusive to the university they attended; contact teachers who graduated from other universities in Chiang Mai also reported a lack of multicultural education in teaching curricula. The concept of ethnicity was only present in social studies courses, without delving deeper into anything beyond teaching basic definitions, while their participation in ethnic activities was limited to extracurricular activities organized by ethnic student groups. These findings underscore the importance of embedding multicultural curriculum components into teacher training programs. Educating teachers about the significance of ethnic diversity can help mitigate educational disparities, reduce cultural gaps, and enhance ethnic pride, aligning with Bank's concept (Banks, 2010). If there are improvements made to the curriculum to emphasize the importance of diversity and the significance of local culture to a greater extent, teachers are likely to receive training that enables them to transmit these values to students when they become teachers in their own communities (Field Note, Interview on October 10, 2021).

Furthermore, receiving low compensation as contract teachers is another reason why they lack motivation to perform duties beyond their assigned tasks. Therefore, promoting the production of indigenous teachers to return to their hometowns with cultural knowledge could

be another solution that creates continuous efforts to rebuild indigenous identity. This approach contrasts with short-term projects led by lowlander teachers who often leave schools every two years.

Conclusion and suggestions

Based on the research findings, it is concluded that instilling pride in oneself and one's roots through the reconstruction of ethnic identity holds significant importance for the younger generation. Collaboration between schools and communities is indispensable in this phenomenon. Schools serve as primary sites for establishing practices, necessitating the development of curricula tailored to meet the community needs. Additionally, instilling cultural ideas in students reduces marginalization, fostering self-esteem, and preserving local culture within the Thai education system. Communities, as bearers of the schools' outcomes, play a crucial role in extending these practices into aspects of daily life and business, contributing to fostering national pride. However, these efforts yield results when conducted as sustained long-term practices. Therefore, creating CRP by uniting individuals within the community or producing new teachers from the community might better meet the needs of Galyani Vadhana compared to relying on transient government-appointed educators.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

To establish ethnic reconstruction practices in schools in remote areas like Galyani Vadhana, it is essential to have local teacher or individuals who're willing to immerse themselves in the community for an extended period. This fosters continuity and community familiarity, making it easier to solicit cooperation from the community. Therefore, recruiting new teachers who are Thai lowlanders for permanent positions is not a suitable solution for driving change in schools, because Thai lowlander teachers often relocate outside the area every 2 years. Consequently, teacher training institutions may focus on increasing the production of teachers from ethnic minority groups and instill knowledge and importance regarding ethnicity to support their voice in schools before assigning them to permanent positions. This ensures that they can utilize their knowledge to further develop their local communities, as envisioned by their community's own aspirations.

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