

Bridging Ethnic Divides: The Impact of Education on Social Cohesion in China's Diverse Landscape

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Abstract: China is a multi-ethnic nation whose national development places a high value on national cohesion, which is enhanced in large part by education. This research examines the role of China's educational system by literature study method in promoting social cohesion and bridging ethnic divides. It delves into the disparities in educational opportunities among ethnic groups, attributing them to historical, geographic, and cultural factors. Multicultural and intercultural education, along with policies for national unity and special education for ethnic minorities, are analyzed. Challenges such as educational gaps, unreasonable curricula, and bilingual education issues are identified. The essay concludes with recommendations to increase funding, diversify curricula, enhance teacher preparation, and implement specific strategies for ethnic minority education, emphasizing the transformative potential of education in fostering social solidarity and transcending ethnic barriers for a more equitable and cohesive future in China.

Keywords: ethnic education, multiculturalism education, intercultural education, national minority

Introduction

China's ethnic diversity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Shi (2021) indicated that the Chinese nation is characterized by mixing and blending^[1]. The Qin Dynasty brought about the first major unification in Chinese history in 221 B.C., laying the foundation for a unified, multi-ethnic kingdom in China. Through ongoing migration, marrying, intermingling, and exchanges, the many ethnic groups progressively fused into a unified organism as they developed, with new ethnic groupings being established regularly. Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (2010) claims that the Central Government of China has identified 56 ethnic groups since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949^[2]. The Han Chinese comprise most of these groups, with the remaining 55 having relatively smaller populations and being referred to as "ethnic minorities".

Education is a significant national effort in China given the country's circumstances. Chen, Zhang, and Li (2022) draw attention to the fact that ethnic education has been strategically positioned by General Secretary Xi to support national unity and create a strong sense of community among the Chinese people^[3]. In addition to fostering educational justice and raising the standard of living for all Chinese citizens, national education may fortify national unity, foster national cohesiveness, and advance the prosperity of all ethnic groups.

Given this context, the essay will focus on the following query: "What role can China's educational system play in promoting social cohesion and bridging ethnic divides?" The effects of educational policy

and the efficacy of multicultural and intercultural education will be examined in this essay. Its objectives are to evaluate the issues that have emerged, offer some helpful solutions, and emphasize the positive benefits of education on social cohesion and unity in China.

1. Overview of ethnically plural societies in China

China is a large and culturally varied nation with a complex identity created by the combination of its unique historical, linguistic, and cultural traits. The Han Chinese are primarily located in the eastern and northeastern plains, as well as in frontier regions that border ethnic minorities, following thousands of years of erratic migration and coexistence. Despite having a small population, ethnic minorities are widely dispersed. Qu (2019) notes that while there are locations where life is more concentrated and autonomous territories for ethnic minorities, these are also distributed throughout the nation^[4]. In theory, China's multi-ethnic zones essentially encircle the whole country. Emphasis is placed on the growth of Han Chinese and ethnic minority synergistic integration.

China's millennia-long historical canvas presents a complex picture of ethnic variety and cohabitation. Various ethnic groups came together in the ancient civilizations of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, with the Han Chinese gradually becoming the dominant group. A centralized administration structure that integrated several ethnic groups was brought about by the imperial age, which promoted a complicated interaction between multicultural and intercultural.

Therefore, appreciating the diverse cultures, languages, and historical backgrounds of these ethnic groups is paramount for a nuanced understanding of China's multifaceted national identity.

2. Education and promoting equality, equity, and social cohesion in China.

2.1 Educational disparities across ethnic groups

According to educational anthropology, there are at least two factors that contribute to the academic achievement gaps among students from ethnic minorities: the community's past, its relationships and survival tactics, and its place in the social hierarchy; and cultural distinctions, conflicts, and ruptures, as well as language communication issues while in school and family interactions (Spindler, 1978, Ogbu, 1991, Heath, 1983)^[5]. The number of people who have completed upper secondary and higher education in the three ethnic minority regions of Yunnan, Guangxi, and Tibet is relatively small and accounts for a small percentage of the population, according to statistics on the number of people with various types of educational attainment per 100,000 population in each region from the Seventh China Population Census data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2021 (Figure 1).

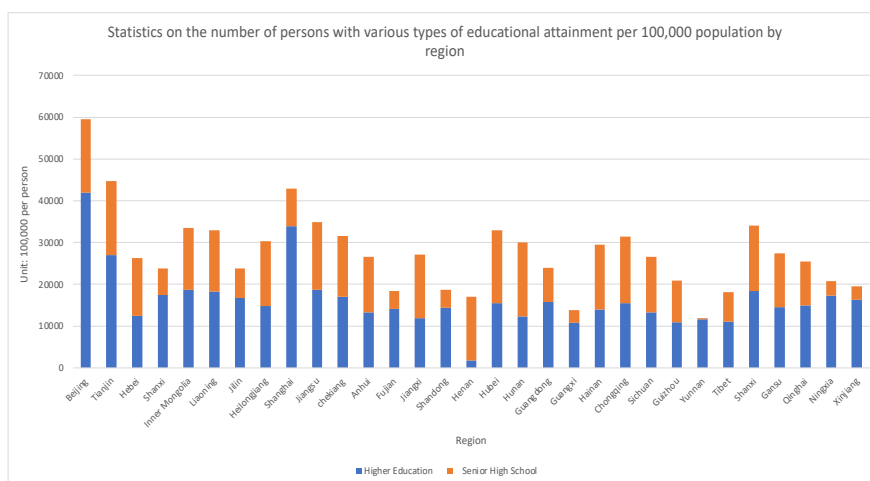


Figure 1

Why do ethnic groups' educational possibilities differ so greatly from one another? Due to historical factors, most of China's ethnic minorities reside in isolated, underdeveloped western regions, particularly those that are mountainous, highland, pastoral, or wooded. The development of modern school education has been slow, in part because of the ethnic minorities' remote geographic location, information isolation, language barriers, and cultural practices. In certain instances, the educational activities of ethnic minorities are still closely linked to their productive labour. Geographically, the five autonomous minority regions (Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, and Tibet), the five multi-ethnic provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan), and certain counties in Jilin, Guangdong, Heilongjiang, Hunan, and Hubei are home to most China's minority populations. The main way that China's educational chances differ from one another is by looking at the different levels of educational development in the nation's eastern regions and western. In turn, China's western area is home to most of the country's population as well as its ethnic minority population.

Due to this, numerous societal issues have arisen because of educational gaps among ethnic minorities. To begin with, there has been a comparatively low investment in education for ethnic minorities because of regional disparities in economic development. As these disparities widen, ethnic minority regions find it increasingly difficult to provide the necessary resources for education, leading to a significant disparity in the amount of education invested in each region compared to the rest of the mainland. In addition, Xu (2008) illustrated that there have been some unfavourable effects from the inheritance and development of national cultures^[6]. The impact of traditional national cultures is unparalleled, and the best and most fundamental are becoming less appealing to the younger generation of ethnic members. Furthermore, some separatists both inside and outside of China have used the pretext of "protecting traditional national cultures" to make accusations that "traditional national cultures are being exterminated" to stir up unrest, erode China's cohesiveness as a nation, and attempt to separate the country.

2.2 The role of education in bridging divides

With the ongoing economic reform and opening, China's economy is steadily rising to the top of the global economy. Xu (2022) signified that based on the region's advantages in terms of resources and national support policies, ethnic areas also have entered a phase of rapid and stable development in recent years^[7]. However, because of the small size of the base, the difference between the total volume and the quality of development is growing even while the growth rates in ethnic areas are higher than those in the eastern regions. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in regional differences in economic development. Wu (2017) showed that this unequal growth has impeded the advancement of education, resulting in a loss of human resources and a reduction in social unity^[8]. China's pluralistic and integrated pattern has become more complex due to the trend of economic globalization: regional disparities have been made worse by economic disparities, and the imbalance between regional development levels and educational opportunities has brought attention to the pressing need to improve the ethnic education system.

Zheng (2007) stated that the government has created and put into effect several long-lasting policies and efforts to support the balanced development of education^[9]. It has created appropriate policies and improved appropriate procedures to increase support for education in ethnic groups and to facilitate the balanced growth of ethnic education.

2.2.1 Multiculturalism education

Alongside the national renaissance movement in Western countries, multicultural education evolved in the 1960s and 1970s. Multicultural education, however, Huang (2001) showed aligns differently from China's national conditions because one of its key characteristics is that it emphasizes the importance

of individual country cultures' independence rather than their mutual integration^[10]. Therefore, the inability to reconcile the inconsistencies and contrasts among various national cultures has long been a weakness of multicultural education.

Wang (2002) noted that a great deal of research has been done over the years by Chinese academics on how to support the harmonious development of education for ethnic minorities^[11]. Some scholars have proposed the theory of "Pluralistic Integration education for the Chinese nation," drawing on concepts from multicultural education in the West and Mr. Fei Xiaotong's(2004) "The Pattern Of Diversity In Unity Of The Chinese Nation."^[12]

For instance, the most prominent factors that set ethnic education apart from general higher education at this stage of education are the study and investigation of ethnic history, culture, art, economics, and religion. This is because religious education enjoys a high status and significant influence among several ethnic minorities. In addition, China's ethnic education system, which includes many ethnic kindergartens, ethnic primary schools, ethnic secondary schools, ethnic colleges (universities), ethnic junior colleges, ethnic vocational schools, ethnic adult schools, and ethnic teacher-training schools, has simultaneously established a comprehensive educational system from early childhood to higher education. Furthermore, China has pushed for the creation of indigenous curricular resources and curriculum reform in basic education. The national curriculum structure for basic education in China has long been quite consistent, and as a result, students have long been denied an understanding of the history and culture of the many ethnic groups, ethnicities, languages, and faiths that make up the Chinese people. Li and Teng (2020) illustrated that to allow for the harmonious development of both the national curriculum and local curricula, as well as to facilitate social harmony, China's basic education curriculum reform considers the need for an overall ethnic-national identity and construction, as well as the specific ecological, social, and cultural needs of the various ethnic groups in each locality^[13].

2.2.2 Interculturalism education

Education systems must consider the multicultural nature of societies to promote peaceful coexistence and constructive human interactions as one of their primary goals and to enhance social cohesion. Intercultural education and multicultural education are the two routes that lead to this objective. China has a long history of multiculturalism in its society due to its multi-ethnic makeup. The advancement of regional ethnic education has always been a priority for the Chinese government. Given that every ethnic group has a unique linguistic, cultural, and religious background, Chinese ethnic education draws from both the theoretical underpinnings of intercultural education and the effective implementation of intercultural education in other nations to advance China's ethnic education policy, support ethnic minority regions and groups in understanding and preserving their own cultures, and simultaneously pursue innovative approaches for synergistic integration with mainstream culture.

The policy of education in minority languages is the most successful policy for achieving intercultural education (Xu, 2008)^[14]. As for the 53 ethnic minorities that still have their languages in China, only a few still use their scripts, the exceptions being the ethnic Manchus and the Hui, who have all given up on their native tongues and adopted Chinese. Furthermore, many ethnic groups' languages and scripts are in danger of going extinct because of modernization and the rise in popularity of the Chinese language. This is detrimental to the preservation of ethnic traits and the advancement of ethnic culture. Consequently, according to Zhang and Tan (2015), it is critical that national education highlight the usage of national scripts and languages and that they be employed once more^[15]. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that while studying their own culture and way of life, students from ethnic minorities must also integrate into modern society and move beyond their communities. Thus, learning Chinese will be crucial for both their

personal and academic futures.

Therefore, bilingual education has been introduced in China's ethnic minority areas to enable pupils to efficiently adjust to modern life while also ensuring the continuation of their languages and scripts. In addition to aiding in the development, inheritance, and preservation of minority languages, the creation of minority language programme and the use of bilingual instruction across all subject areas also promote societal peace. Students from ethnic minorities will study Mandarin through bilingual education. Since Mandarin is the common language in China, learning it helps improve societal stability by fostering mutual regard, understanding, and communication amongst many ethnic groups.

2.2.3 Education on national unity

According to Jiang (2023), a thorough examination of the national unity issue and a grasp of the pertinent facets of the work being done to promote national unity reveal an inseparable relationship between national identity and national unity, and that the two have an impact on one another^[16]. National identity is the central issue that must be resolved to achieve national unity, and it is achieved through the channel of sustained and successful national unity education. An essential tool for preserving and advancing national unity in life and work is the successful implementation of national unity education. The long-term growth of national education depends in large part on the proper execution of education for national unity, which is a crucial component of national education.

The consolidation of the ideological foundation of the Chinese national community is facilitated by national unity education, which assists individuals of all nationalities in realizing that their development paths are interconnected and that the Chinese nation has evolved into an inseparable unity throughout its long-term historical development. Second, ethnic minority areas are strategically vital for preserving border stability and protecting national security due to their geographic location. Thus, national unity education may effectively prevent separatist plans from coming to pass, preserve national unity, and advance national unity. It can also facilitate national unity and improve social cohesiveness.

2.3 Special education policy for ethnic minorities

Promoting equality and ethnic unity is a crucial part of strengthening social cohesion. Intending to close the gap and attain balanced development in education, China has a beneficial policy on education for ethnic minorities. Xu (2008) showed that this policy is known as the differential education policy, and it is based on the differences between education in ethnic areas and education in the country's interior. This education policy is unique because it pertains to ethnic minorities^[17]. For instance, a distinct admission scoreline is established for ethnic applicants on the university entrance exam, and a preferred policy of admitting ethnic college students at a reduced score is implemented. For Han Chinese students, the score line will be lower than the entrance score line. Due to this policy, the disparity in education between regions has decreased, and educational equity has been promoted.

3. Challenges and limitations

3.1 Educational gaps between ethnic regions and other regions

Through a positive and differentiated education strategy, we have strengthened our support for ethnic minority education even as the State's financial resources have expanded. The ethnic regions themselves, however, are unable to "supply blood" for education due to the growing disparity between their economic development and that of the rest of the mainland. This leads to a significant imbalance in education investment between the ethnic regions and the mainland, which severely limits the advancement of ethnic minority education in China.

3.2 Unreasonable curriculum

The curriculum lacks coherence. There is no integration of a rich and varied cultural enrichment curriculum when working with different student groups. While multicultural elements have been incorporated by schools and regional governments into their curricula and educational systems, this can only be considered a form of unidirectional multicultural education that does not consider the dynamics of “interculturality” and lacks intercultural interaction and transmission. For instance, the cultural backgrounds and introductions of other ethnic minorities are not reflected in the curricula for Han Chinese pupils, which leads to the exclusive assimilation of these groups into the Han Chinese population. They form preconceptions and stereotypes about the culturally diverse beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of minority ethnic groups because they lack a thorough awareness of the general cultures and experiences of many ethnic groups and communities. It is difficult for students from different cultural backgrounds to overcome barriers and engage in cross-cultural communication that is founded on a thorough knowledge and comprehension of the many cultural differences. They also struggle to adopt an attitude of respect and appreciation for the diversity of our nation. The status of national culture and mainstream culture differs in China’s national education system when it comes to the choice of teaching materials, which limits the integration of cultures and, in some cases, reduces their equipotential interaction.

3.3 Bilingual Education

There are still numerous issues with China’s bilingual education system. One of the primary obstacles is the teaching staff; there is a severe scarcity of professionally qualified, low-professional bilingual instructors in minority communities, as well as a dearth of bilingual teacher-specific training programme. Second, the study and creation are deficient in educational resources specifically for ethnic minorities. For a very long time, most teaching materials in ethnic minority areas without a written language were taken directly from the unified Chinese textbook; in ethnic minority areas with a written language, the teaching materials were frequently translated directly from the Chinese textbook. Minority students find these educational materials foreign and blatantly based on Chinese culture, which is detrimental to their learning. Lastly, because of diversity, students from ethnic minorities are less interested in their languages and cultures and more drawn to Chinese, which will be detrimental to their ability to preserve and grow their cultural heritage. This will undermine the policy's initial intent.

3.4 Limitation of special education policy for ethnic minorities

The policy of advantageous differentials in funding and enrollment frequently applies to students from ethnic minorities but does not apply to Han students in the same region of the country. For instance, under this special policy, a student from an ethnic minority group will be admitted to a university with a lower score than a Han Chinese student if the two students are enrolled in the same school, in the same region, in the same educational environment, and under the same educational conditions.

Moreover, Tian (2010) indicated that the national education policy’s governing ideology is prejudiced. By looking at China’s national education policy’s past and present, the country prioritises protecting minorities’ right to education overregulating the role that national education plays in preserving and advancing minority cultures^[18]. There is not much information regarding the growth and preservation of traditional minority cultures in China’s present national education strategy.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Increase funding for education in ethnic minority areas

More central funding should be allocated to minority education. It is recommended that specific funds

be established and prudently managed to support the advancement of education for ethnic minorities. This would ensure the financial stability of educational initiatives within these areas. Second, to guarantee that every child in ethnic minority communities may finish their basic education, the financial aid programme for low-income students in those areas needs to be considerably enhanced. Finally, the benefits of remote learning can be utilized, and educational collaboration between developed and ethnic minority regions can be enhanced, allowing ethnic minority regions to share top-notch educational resources.

4.2 Diversified curriculum settings

Multicultural and intercultural education should be combined in education for ethnic minorities. These two approaches can work in tandem to help ethnic groups learn about and appreciate the diversity of other ethnic cultures, as well as to foster intercultural dialogue and accelerate ethnic development. To help the various ethnic groups in China achieve true mutual respect and understanding, as well as to lessen prejudice among the various ethnic groups and increase the cohesiveness of society even further, the curriculum should be multi-directional. It should teach students about the cultures and languages of other ethnic groups in addition to those of one. It should also not be limited to any one ethnic group.

Moreover, the creation of educational resources is crucial. The government ought to provide funding so that academics from ethnic areas, prominent persons from their cultures, and highly skilled individuals from ethnic minority areas can collaborate to create varied instructional materials that are specific to their regions. Furthermore, it is important to support educators who work with ethnic minorities to include regional cultural aspects in their lesson plans.

Meanwhile, Su and Zhang (2017) point out that teachers are essential to implementing ethnic education in ethnic communities, promoting ethnic cohesion, and achieving the peaceful development of all ethnic groups^[19]. Teachers are the main forces behind the promotion of national cohesion and ethnic education. To carry out national education and foster unity among the nation, teachers are essential, besides, teachers' ideologies will undoubtedly have an impact on their students because they are the architects and mentors of their physical and mental growth. Furthermore, bolstering the preparation of teachers is very important. Proficiency in teaching is a prerequisite for multilingual education. Professional teacher training is essential if we wish to improve bilingual education in places inhabited by ethnic minorities. It is possible to train Chinese teachers in the official language and to improve the academic subjects and Chinese language proficiency of teachers from ethnic minorities. Simultaneously, the system of training and delivery for bilingual teachers can be enhanced to enable the effective implementation of educational interventions in particular school contexts.

4.3 Enhancement of specific strategies for ethnic minority education

Differential education policies should not be confused with ethnic minority education policies, even though policies based on differences in educational opportunities are bound to be more pertinent to ethnic minorities because most of China's ethnic minorities reside in regions with comparatively regressive levels of economic, cultural, and educational development. Teng and Ma (2005) pointed out that to address differences and plurality based on the principle of "differential treatment," the traditional single criterion of ethnicity should be broken down, considering regional differences in ethnicity, economic level, culture, social class, and the integration of ethnic minority beneficiary groups into mainstream society^[20]. It should also be examined comprehensively in several dimensions.

5. Conclusion

With centuries of historical coexistence and cultural fusion, China's unique tapestry of ethnic diversity offers opportunities as well as problems for the country's educational system. A complex

interaction of historical, economic, and cultural reasons is revealed by examining educational inequality between ethnic groups, requiring focused and nuanced responses. Education is shown to be a potent force in mending ethnic barriers, and policies that support multilingual, multicultural, and intercultural education and national unity education are essential.

China needs comprehensive measures to address challenges in bilingual education, unjust curricula and educational gaps. The policy needs to be re-evaluated to account for geography. To overcome these hurdles, funding for education in ethnic minority communities should be increased, curricular settings diversified, teacher preparation enhanced, and specific tactics for ethnic minority education employed.

In conclusion, it is impossible to overestimate the transformational potential of education in promoting social solidarity. China can promote a harmonious society and transcend ethnic barriers by adopting the values of equity, inclusion, and equality. The recommendations made offer a path forward for a more welcoming educational environment that values variety, protects cultural legacy, and eventually fortifies the social cohesion of the country. China has the chance to rectify current inequalities and lay the groundwork for a more fair and cohesive future through these measures.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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