

Multicultural Education in Xavier Learning Community, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of multicultural education is not only to preserve cultural traditions among multiethnic students but also to foster critical thinking and reflection on their newly acquired knowledge and on the events occurring around them. While many countries have already focused on the different needs of their student population integrating multicultural education, Thailand's implementation has been limited, particularly at the preschool and secondary levels in some public schools. This research addresses this gap by focusing on a higher education institution in northern Thailand, Xavier Learning Community (XLC), which caters to students from various religions and ethnic backgrounds. The study aims to understand how XLC implements multicultural education to foster an inclusive learning environment. Employing qualitative research methods, such as participant and non-participant observation, interviews with 25 participants (including Jesuit priests, teachers, lecturers, and students), and document analysis, the research examines the curriculum and activities at XLC that promote multicultural education, critical thinking, and reflection. The research findings indicate that XLC embodies the principles of multicultural education by providing equal educational opportunities, preparing students for a diverse society, and promoting awareness of social justice. XLC's approach effectively integrates students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Notably, critical thinking and reflection courses empower students to address social issues in Thailand. This study provides insights into the effective implementation of multicultural education in higher education settings, emphasizing its potential to establish inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Keywords: critical thinking, ethnicity, reflection, Thailand

Introduction

Thailand is ethnically diverse, encompassing many autochthonous ethnic communities, such as Akha, Hmong, Lue, Karen, Lahu, Shan, and numerous others. These ethnic communities are geographically scattered from the rural jungle forests of the North of the Kingdom to the shores of the Andaman Sea in the deep South. These indigenous people number approximately thirty and hail originally from beyond the North of the Kingdom (Morton, 2016; Leepreecha & Sakboon, 2021). They also differ dramatically in their cultural, linguistic, and religious belief systems as well as their acquired knowledge of survival skills (Vaddhanaphuti et al., 2022).

Ethnic communities in Thailand often live in rural, hard-to-reach areas, limiting their access to education and essential services (UNICEF, 2019). In 2005, the Thai government introduced free education for all children in the country, including non-nationals and disadvantaged groups (Arphattananon, 2018). Although this policy aimed to be inclusive, it was only partially implemented across some schools. Many children in remote areas still struggle to attain education, which affects their job opportunities. Those who attain higher education often lose touch with their indigenous knowledge, making it difficult to reconnect with their communities (Buadaeng & Leepreecha, 2009).

Diversity among ethnic minority groups in Thailand, including differences in languages, religions, traditions, and lifestyles, has created challenges in teaching and learning. Since the early 20th century, Thailand has utilized education to promote nation-building and cultural assimilation (Key, 2008, as cited in Arphattananon, 2018; Leepreecha & Sakboon, 2021). The Ministry of Education designs the curriculum, which often disregards the history and culture of the ethnic Hill Tribe peoples. Consequently, “textbooks and curricula produced and distributed in Bangkok seldom mention ethnic minorities, unless in ways that characterize highland ethnic minority people as problematic” (Leepreecha & Meixi, 2019, p. 15).

The 1997 national constitution called for local involvement in education, and in 2000, the Ministry of Education introduced a policy allowing local people to teach for 30% of school hours. However, in practice, teachers in rural schools devote little attention to actually imparting any ethnological cultural education to their children, nor do they seek any assistance from local elders or experts in the field (Leepreecha & Sakboon, 2021). The constitution also permits ‘alternative education’ for local and private sectors, such as home schools and community-centered schools. Mowakhi Primary School in Chiang Mai province, for example, “the school curriculum emphasizes learning both Thai and Pgazk’Nyau systems of knowledge¹ It is essential to prepare their children for civic and economic participation in Thai society and village life” (Leepreecha & Meixi, 2019, p. 20). Recently, the Ministry of Education has attempted to improve the quality of education for ethnic and migrant students, allowing schools to create rules that reflect their students’ diverse cultures (Arphattananon, 2018).

In addition to private, non-governmental organizations and community-based schools, religious institutions have also played essential roles in promoting education based on diverse ancestral backgrounds. In 2008, the Jesuits² began envisioning their own educational institution emphasizing quality education for the poor and disadvantaged young people in Thailand and neighboring countries, with a particular focus on ethnic communities (XLC, 2018). The Xavier Learning Community specifically addresses this gap by prioritizing the educational needs of autochthonous students, whom the Thai government has overlooked.

¹ The Mowakhi school collaborates with local leaders, parents, and teachers within the village to develop educational materials and design course content for their children (IMPECT 2012 as cited in Leepreecha & meixi, 2019).

² Jesuit is a member of the Society of Jesus (S.J.), a Roman Catholic order of priests and brothers founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Their apostolate includes educational, missionary, and charitable works; with 16,000-plus priests, brothers, scholastics, and novices worldwide, we are the largest male religious order in the Catholic Church. They are pastors, teachers, and chaplains. They are also doctors, lawyers, and astronomers, among many other roles in the Church and society. In our varied ministries, we care for the whole person: body, mind, and soul. And especially in their education ministries, they seek to nurture “men and women for others.” (<https://www.jesuits.org/about-us/the-jesuits/> accessed 13/07/2022)

In some countries, state education for ethnic groups is used as a tool to assimilate ethnic youth into the dominant culture of the nation. This practice is observed in countries like the US, China, and Thailand (Dawson, 2012; Haibo, 2007; Buadeng & Leepreecha, 2009). Moreover, approaches to multicultural education differ across regions. Taiwan, for example, has adopted multicultural policies aimed at integrating 16 indigenous groups into the school system (Nesterova, 2019). In Southeast Asia, countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have gradually implemented multicultural education, particularly with respect to religious life (Ilyasin & Tohet, 2020). In Thailand, previous studies have shown a colorful picture of issues related to multicultural education. These studies have addressed topics such as the policy framework for multicultural education, multicultural literature for multicultural education in the English language, the implementation of multicultural education through social studies lessons, and the Thai community curriculum as a model for multicultural education (Tangkijaroenkun et al., 2022; Arphattananon, 2018; Arphattananon, 2020).

However, no study related to multicultural education in a Catholic community with diverse ethnic student groups has ever been conducted. To bridge this gap, I have selected Xavier Learning Community in Chiang Rai Province as the focal point of my study. XLC is a Catholic institution that offers tertiary education to young individuals from various ethnic communities, predominantly hailing from remote areas in Thailand.

This research, therefore, aims to investigate how XLC integrates multicultural education to cultivate an inclusive learning environment. Banks and Banks (2015) identify four key approaches to incorporating multicultural content into the curriculum: the contribution, additive, transformation, and social action approaches. The contribution approach allows teachers to include content about holidays and festivities of various ethnic and cultural groups in the curriculum. The additive approach involves adding content related to the cultures, concepts, and themes of different ethnic and cultural groups to the curriculum without altering the structure, purposes, and characteristics of the instruction. The transformative approach challenges the fundamental assumptions and paradigms of the curriculum. It aims to educate students about concepts, events, issues, and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The social action approach, the final approach, encompasses all elements of the transformation approach but adds components that require students to make decisions and take action in relation to the concepts, issues, or problems that they have studied through the organization of activities or projects (Banks & Banks, 2015). This research will explore which of these approaches XLC employs to create an inclusive educational experience for its diverse student body.

Multicultural Education in Xavier Learning Community

In this section, an outline of the method for obtaining data is offered. Additionally, the study's findings encompass educational opportunities, curriculum, and activities both inside and outside the classroom of XLC. Furthermore, the study addressed and debated some previous research.

Methods

In this study, a qualitative method of data collection was utilized to collect all data in this research project. Qualitative methods include Archival Research, Participant Observation, and Semi-structured interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The research focuses on XLC, which was established in July 2017. XLC is located at 219, Moo 8, Tha Khao Plueak, Mae Chan District, in the Chiang Rai Province of Northern Thailand, near the Mekong River where many

ethnic communities reside. XLC is sanctioned as an institute of learning under the Jesuit Foundation for Education (JFE) in Thailand.

The school's first director was Father Pichet Saengthien (2017 – 2022), and the current director is Father Vinai Boonlue. There are eighteen members of the teaching staff – seven of whom are Jesuit priests, one Jesuit seminarian, ten full-time lay teachers, and eleven volunteer teachers from varying countries. Additionally, thirteen employees and/or volunteer workers dedicate their time to the community in positions other than teaching. Those who volunteer in teaching positions on an annual basis arrive from the Philippines, Australia, the US, Singapore, Myanmar, and other countries. The student body at XLC, which typically consists of around eighty-three students, represents a wide range of ethnic groups, including Karen, Akha, Thai, Hmong, Lahu, Leesu, Thai Lue, and Thai Yai.³ Many of these students come from economically marginalized, remote, and high mountainous regions of Northern Thailand and neighboring countries. They live together in dormitories on campus. They also practice a variety of religions, such as Catholicism, Buddhism, and Protestantism. XLC provides these students with a four-year education comparable to a university-level experience.

XLC was selected as the research site because it is an institution that includes students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Additionally, XLC provides a learning environment for students over and above the basic high school level and can be of enormous benefit over the lifetime of the individuals in attendance and their local communities. Moreover, XLC is a private Catholic institution. The selection of XLC as a research site in no way indicates that problems or deficiencies in multicultural education occur only in XLC. However, because of limitations on resources, capacity, and time, only XLC can be examined.

The study used qualitative methods for data collection. Semi-structured interviews with 25 participants, including Jesuit priests, teachers, lecturers, and students, were conducted. During interviews, with permission from the interviewees, the conversations were recorded with the intention of transcribing them verbatim. In addition to interviews, activities conducted by the culturally diverse ethnic class at XLC were observed. Furthermore, time devoted to communal activities outside the confines of the classroom, such as field trips, sports programs, informal meetings, and participation in agricultural pursuits, was enormously beneficial to this study. Finally, field notes were used to document information gathered from interviews and observations during the data collection.

Results and Discussion

XLC's Multicultural Education for Marginalized Ethnic Youth

The Jesuit mission in Thailand has prioritized youth education and development through teaching roles, student guidance, and social activities since 1954⁴. In 2013, recognizing the necessity for a dedicated educational institution, the Thai Jesuits made the decision to establish an institute of higher education. As a result, in 2017, XLC, an educational institution, was

³ This information was calculated based on data I collected in 2023.

⁴ Jesuits' return to Thailand in 1954, marking their continued educational efforts in the country. They established dormitories, served as spiritual advisors, and initiated social outreach programs such as the Xavier Camp. The narrative also highlights the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in northern Thailand, particularly their lack of recognition and limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. To address these disparities, the Jesuits founded the Xavier Learning Community in 2017 in Chiang Rai Province.

established to provide educational opportunities for young people. Reflection on multicultural education, results of interviews, and observations demonstrate that the purpose of building XLC was for the benefit of poor and marginalized people, especially ethnic people who live in remote areas. XLC provides these people with an opportunity to obtain higher education. This is indistinguishable from the concept Banks and Banks (2015) define: “Multicultural education is also a reform movement that is trying to change the schools and other educational institutions so that students from all social-class, gender, racial, language, and cultural groups will have equal opportunities to learn” (p. 3).

This study distinguishes itself from previous research by highlighting XLC’s unique approach. Unlike most universities and colleges, which are public educational institutions where students must pay tuition fees, except those who receive scholarships, XLC provides all instruction, extracurricular activities, accommodations, and meals at no cost. Additionally, XLC fosters an environment where students can preserve and share their cultural heritage while engaging in cultural exchange programs with international institutions.

Secondly, the administrators and teaching staff at XLC have attempted to create an environment in which students can preserve, take pride in, and share their cultural inheritances with those from different ethnic groups. Over and above providing a domain in which students not only take pride in their cultural inheritances, but share those with their peers, XLC also networks with universities, colleges, and Jesuit schools in other countries, providing connections through which these undergraduates may participate in cultural exchange programs enabling them to interact with and experience cultural differences on a much broader playing field. In contrast to this study, the majority of academics mentioned in the introduction conducted research projects of schools within Thailand, the US, China, and other countries that intended their systems of education to be employed as a means with which to assimilate young people into the dominant culture of those countries (Dawson, 2012; Haibo, 2007; Buadeng & Leepreecha, 2009). This situation is prevalent throughout Thailand, wherever the Ministry of Education permits schools to establish rules and regulations aligned with their students’ diverse cultures. A closer examination of school practices in these instances reveals that what appears to be an embrace of cultural diversity is often merely a guise for assimilation (Arphattananon, 2018).

Moreover, the majority of previous studies were related to public schools or universities, while this study focused exclusively on a fledgling Jesuit Catholic institution.

Curriculum and Activities

XLC has endeavored to create a culture-based program for students from different ethnic groups. Researchers and teachers, with the help of students, investigated and collected data on ethnic cultures to create appropriate programs, and lesson plans were carefully evaluated. This program includes several subjects related to the traditional culture and beliefs of ethnic students, such as Thai study, intercultural communication, and social and cultural studies in the ASEAN community. Moreover, in class, the teachers encourage ethnic students to share their traditions and cultural habits through essays to promote effective cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, they also provided lesson plans in which the students were asked to research the individual cultures in which they matured and report back to the class.

Beyond formal classroom hours, extracurricular activities are organized to explore the culture of various ethnic groups by visiting cultural preservation centers or by living in and spending time in villages of differing ethnicities. In addition, XLC invites indigenous elders and students’ parents to the campus to share their knowledge and experiences with the students. XLC students, along with some students from Jesuit schools in the Asia Pacific, have the chance to

meet and exchange cultural experiences at XLC and during field trips to various places in Chiang Rai province. Moreover, an excellent opportunity to exchange cultures is presented on what is termed “Culture Night.” Annually, at the beginning of December, the Cultural Night program is organized on the XLC campus in front of the classroom building. The program is organized by the Student Council Members, with 2-3 students from each class responsible for organizing this event. Upon inquiry about the purpose of this program, Boon, a teacher, replied: “The primary purpose of the cultural night is to celebrate the rich diversity of students’ backgrounds by showcasing various traditions, customs, foods, and performances. It provides a meaningful opportunity for students to learn about different cultures and respect these differences” (Boon, personal communication, July 4, 2024). Furthermore, it also helps “students appreciate their own culture and others” (Michael, personal communication, July 4, 2024). As a result, ethnic students also become excited because this contributes to a better understanding of the traditional culture inherited from their ancestors and adds a degree of pride to their own ethnic identity.

When compared with some authors who research and apply multicultural education to the curriculum of some schools (Nesterova, 2019; Arphattananon, 2018), the findings above are different from previous studies because most previous studies have presented curriculum for ethnically diverse students in primary, secondary and high school, but have not mentioned cultures-based curriculum for higher education. After all, these programs are primarily aimed at ethnically diverse students in public schools. This research, however, focused on the curriculum at XLC - a Jesuit Catholic Institution where the culture of ethnic students is incorporated into lessons and activities are created for students to learn and interact with other ethnic students outside of the classroom.

Critical Thinking and Reflection Courses

A particular point in the findings section is that in addition to content and activities related to culture, XLC provides students with two additional courses of study: critical thinking and reflection courses. Students at XLC are ethnic young people from remote areas, and some do not even possess identity cards that would provide recognition of citizenship. Therefore, these subjects help students arrive at better and more informed decisions through theories of philosophy, along with practices in group discussions and field trips where theory can be converted into practice. This concurs with the thinking of Arphattananon (2020) assertion that educational strategies should address unequal power structures in society (p. 55), which can help students recognize stereotypes and structural inequalities. Arphattananon also highlights that multicultural education in Thailand often adopts a liberal approach rather than radical or critical forms (Naowarat, 2018, as cited in Arphattananon, 2020; Arphattananon, 2018). Arphattananon, therefore, advocates for integrating critical thinking, reflection, and empathy into multicultural education to better prepare students for understanding and respecting diverse cultures. Furthermore, Tangkitjaroenkun et al. (2022) assert that literature in multicultural education can enhance students’ empathy, become socially and culturally enlightened, and seek a more harmonious society.

However, XLC’s approach is different from Arphattananon’s (2020) methods. While her research emphasizes role-playing, cooperative learning, and social action skills to address power imbalances (p. 55), XLC focuses on introducing students to some philosophical ideas for further analysis. According to Lipman et al. (2010), philosophy offers students a structure to engage in critical and profound thinking about intricate matters. At XLC, instruction includes group discussions with discussion questions, field trips, and reflection activities, offering

students opportunities to connect theoretical insights with practical experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of their cultural and social contexts.

In brief, the study of XLC highlights its unique approach to multicultural education within a Jesuit Catholic institution. By offering free education and incorporating both classroom and extracurricular activities, XLC fosters cultural pride, cross-cultural communication, and a deep understanding of diverse ethnic traditions. Moreover, critical thinking and reflection courses further enhance XLC's innovative approach, empowering students to critically engage with societal structures and their own cultural identities and courses of study.

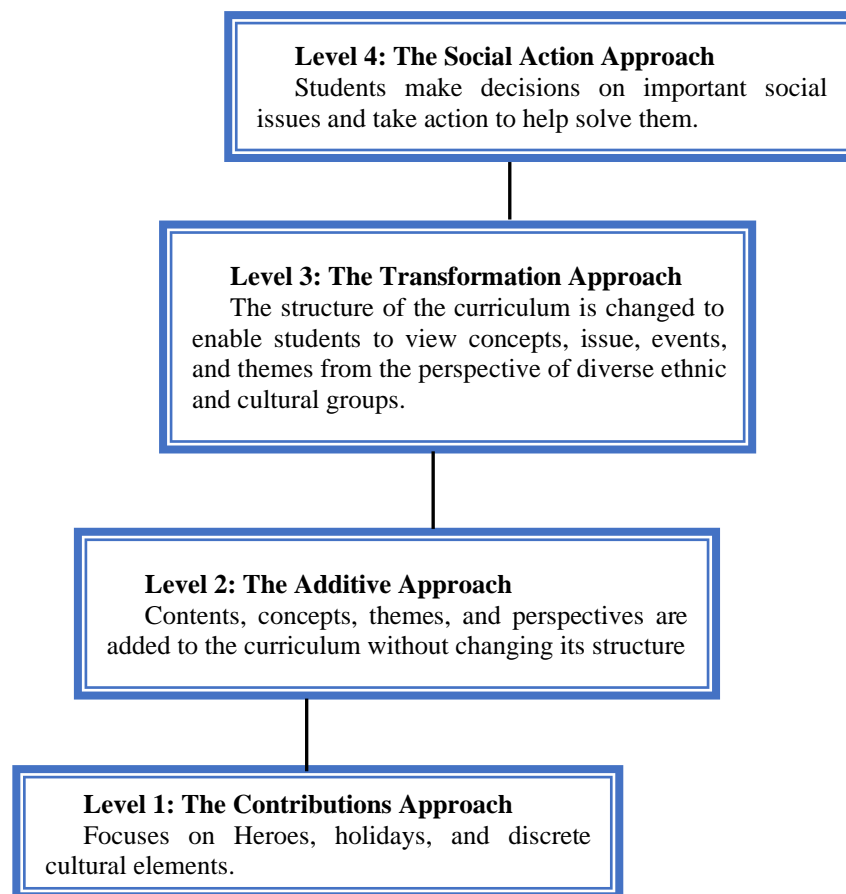
Conclusion

Thailand's rich ethnic diversity poses both challenges and opportunities in education. While policies have aimed at inclusivity, many ethnic minorities still struggle to access quality education that reflects their cultural heritage. Institutions like Xavier Learning Community demonstrate the potential of multicultural education to address these challenges. By integrating diverse cultural perspectives into its curriculum, XLC offers a model for inclusive education that respects and empowers students from various ethnic backgrounds.

XLC, established by the Jesuit mission in Thailand, offers a unique educational model that provides free education, accommodations, and meals to marginalized and ethnic communities. It inserts the culture of ethnic students into its curriculum and creates activities such as cultural exchange and events like Culture Night. Moreover, the curriculum emphasizes critical thinking and reflection courses, which help students become critical thinkers and reflective individuals. Students are able to demonstrate mature thinking, the ability to consider multiple perspectives and respect for other ethnic identities. XLC is a Catholic institution that reflects multicultural education in Thailand, offering an inclusive and empowering learning environment that respects and celebrates cultural diversity.

An investigation of Banks and Banks's theory (2015) revealed that young people should be encouraged to become people capable of social action through instruction on understanding issues and concepts from multiple perspectives. In this way, students will gain experience in analyzing, reviewing, and synthesizing problems (Banks & Banks, 2015).

Figure 1: Bank's Four Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content



(Source: Draw by the author)

When analyzing the curriculum data and activities at XLC, the focus was fixed on the following: XLC facilitates students in becoming ‘agents of change’ by offering courses on Reflection (Ruankool, 2022). This implies that XLC not only encourages students to develop critical thinking skills but also helps them reflect in deeper and more profound ways on their experiences. According to Ash and Clayton (2009), without reflection, experience alone can lead to perpetuating stereotypes, providing oversimplified solutions to intricate problems, and making inaccurate generalizations based on limited data. As a result, students enrolled in courses on reflection can gain a correct and better understanding of concepts, social issues, and problems. Finally, students will take specific and appropriate actions for the social context in which they have lived and will live. Based on this analysis above, incorporation of the concept of reflection between levels three and four of Banks and Banks’ Four Levels of Integration in their Ethnic Content model should be accomplished. An exploration of what reflection means according to the Jesuit educational tradition, how it can benefit students, and how it aligns with Banks and Banks’s model is in order:

First, a definition of ‘reflection’ is offered. “In the original Latin, the term reflection (reflecto) means literally ‘to bend back’; it is linked, in sound and in concept, to respectus, which means ‘to look back.’ The process of reflection demands that our students look back on their experiences with the goal of shedding light on them to understand them better” (Nowacek & Mountin, 2012, p.136). In addition, according to the International Center for Jesuit Education (1993), “Reflection is a thoughtful reconsideration of some subject matter, experience, idea, purpose or spontaneous reaction, in order to grasp its significance more fully” (p. 16).

Therefore, reflection is a process of reviewing, looking back, or reflecting on experiences, ideas, and concepts.

The practice of reflection is best performed immediately following a class, field trip, or activity. Teachers can establish quiet times for students to reflect. They can suggest questions for students to consider, such as: How did the experience make you feel? What did it mean to you? How does it help you? What did you learn from it? The teacher can also propose other questions that are relevant to the context. It is important to note that these questions are just suggestions, and students are not required to answer all of them. According to Ruankool (2023), the crucial factor is that these questions “encourage them to think beyond one-way learning, where the teacher simply imparts knowledge, and to gain a new understanding” (p.6). At the end, students can share what they reflected on during the silent time. Sharing should take place in an atmosphere of respect, with active listening and no judgment or comments. Through the sharing session, students can share their reflections and be exposed to different perspectives from their classmates. This practice can become a habit for students. As a result, students can reflect not only on what they learned in class but also outside school and after graduation.

Therefore, incorporating reflection into Banks and Banks's Four Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content model can help students achieve a deeper understanding of issues, events, and concepts. As a result, students will be able to reflect more profoundly on the many challenges. They will inevitably face in their lives.

Finally, “reflection is vital because it enables students in this learning community to develop their independent and critical thinking, including the issues of social justice” (Ruankool, 2022, p.8). Hopefully, this idea can inspire other schools to implement this subject into the curriculum.

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Biodata

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