

# School Behavior Culture of Khmer Ethnic Students in Southern Vietnam - A Case Study in Chau Thanh District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam

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**Abstract— Background:** School behavior culture is a system of cultural standards and values that affect consciousness, attitudes and behaviors of teachers and students during the process of communication at school. This plays a leading factor in the process of training and educating students' personality. Therefore, in each educational environment, the development of school behavior culture must be considered as the most concerned and important element. School behavior culture is part of the national culture, which inherits and promotes the traditional values of the nation (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2020). Each school has its own culture with behaviors, regulations, unreasonable opinions, and complicated moral standards. Of those, morality is the root of behavioral culture. Social norms are principles that guide and regulate behavioral culture, and behavioral patterns are institutions that guarantee and implement behavior (Nguyen Van Tuan, 2008). In the Khmer ethnic community, these elements are built on the basis of Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, the ideas of Khmer Theravada Buddhism have a great impact on the moral conception, behavioral standards and social patterns of each individual in general, and the Khmer students in particular. **Research Objectives:** The aim of this research is to explore the reality of school behavior culture of Khmer ethnic students in terms of the behavioral relationship between Khmer ethnic students and teachers, the behavioral relationship between Khmer ethnic students and other students, and the behavioral relationship between Khmer students themselves. **Research Methods:** The study was conducted with the adoption of interview and questionnaire survey with the participation of 200 Khmer students and 200 Kinh students in the academic year of 2014 - 2015 to determine the reality of school behavior culture of Southern Khmer students through the case of students from Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary Schools. **Results:** The results show that the majority of Khmer students have a sense of compliance with standards and behavioral patterns in their behaviors at school. Furthermore, the survey results also indicate that there are discrepancies in behavior culture between Khmer and Kinh students in some aspects such as the way how to address themselves, and the way how to show the attitudes towards uncultured behaviors. Based on the findings, solutions are likely proposed which contribute to the building up of school behavior culture in Vietnamese high schools.

**Keywords—** Behavior culture, school culture, Vietnam Southern Khmer students.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Behavioral culture is a system of behavioral patterns related to attitudes and behavioral skills of individuals and communities in relation to the natural, social and personal setting. This system is based on certain socio-cultural standards in order to

preserve and develop the life of individuals and communities with more humanity (Nguyen Van Tuan, 2008:36).

School behavior culture is a system of cultural standards and values that affect consciousness, attitudes and behaviors of teachers and students during the process of communication at school. This is an essential factor for students' personality training and educating. Therefore, it is the most crucial to develop school behavior culture in each educational environment. School behavior culture is part of the national culture, which inherits and promotes the traditional values of the nation (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2020). Each school has its own culture with behaviors, regulations, unreasonable opinions, and complicated moral standards. Therefore, the research is aimed at exploring the current situation of school behavior culture of Southern Khmer students through the case of students from Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary School in Chau Thanh District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 1. Research time and location:

The study was conducted in Chau Thanh District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam. In Tra Vinh Province, Chau Thanh is a district in which there are many Khmer ethnic people. The secondary and upper-secondary students, who were studying at Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary School in the academic year of 2014 - 2015 invited to take part in the survey. This school was chosen for this study because of its relatively high percentage of Khmer students every year (about 50% of Khmer ethnic students) and the rest of other ethnic communities with the majority of Kinh students. This feature facilitates the researchers to compare behavioral culture between Khmer and Kinh students.

### 2. Data collection

The primary data was collected based on the following basic data collection tools.

- Interview: The researchers interviewed 200 Southern Vietnam Khmer students (Khmer ethnic people in Southern Vietnam) studying in Chau Thanh District, Tra Vinh Province. Also, 50 parents and teachers of those students were interviewed. In order to make the foundation for comparing the behavioral culture between Khmer and Kinh students, the

interviews were conducted on a group of 200 Kinh students studying in the same school.

-Questionnaire: A survey questionnaire was implemented on a group of 200 Southern Vietnam Khmer students and 200 Kinh students.

In addition, during the research process, behaviors and attitudes of both Khmer and Kinh students at Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary School were also observed.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary School was built in 2010, which was upgraded from Luong Hoa A Secondary School. The school is located on 922 provincial road in O Bap Hamlet, Luong Hoa A Commune, Chau Thanh District, Tra Vinh Province. This school, which houses many Southern Khmer students, is located in a poor commune. The majority of the students are from poor or near-poor households. Therefore, students face many difficulties in their learning. Currently, in Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper-Secondary School, there are 29 classes with 869 students, of whom are 411 Southern Khmer students, accounting for 47.3%.

Southern Khmer people are agricultural residents who have lived in the South of Vietnam for a long time. All Khmer people, from birth to death, consider themselves Buddhists. Khmer Theravada Buddhism has made a profound impact on the life of Southern Khmer people (Agency for Ethnic Minority Affairs in Southern Vietnam, 2000). In each Khmer village, there is at least one pagoda. The pagoda is not only a place for religious ritual activities and monks' practice, but also a place for the community's belief and religious practice. Furthermore, it is a place for cultural, educational, and training activities (Nguyen Tien Dung, 2017:103). Each pagoda has classrooms for activities related to the monks' practice, cultural development, and the Khmer language training for children in the village (Ha Ly, 2004).

Behavioral culture consists of three levels, including *ethics*, *social norms* and *behavioral patterns*. Of those, ethics are the root of behavioral culture, and social norms are principles that guide and regulate behavioral culture. Also, behavioral patterns are institutions for behavior guarantee and practice (Nguyen Van Tuan, 2008). In the Khmer ethnic community, these elements are built on the basis of the Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, the ideas of Khmer Theravada Buddhism have great effects on the moral conception, behavioral standards and social patterns of each individual in general, and Khmer students in particular.

#### *Regarding student-teacher behavioral relationship:*

In daily communication, Khmer students are quiet and afraid of sharing ideas in front of the crowd even though they get the message of communication. They are also unconfident to show themselves to other people (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2012:9). Most Khmer students can speak the Khmer language and tend to use this language for communication outside and inside the school. The teaching and learning of Khmer language is maintained in a variety of types, which happens in public schools and in private schools. Specially, the Khmer

language instruction takes place unceasingly in Khmer pagodas that are led by the monks of such pagodas (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2012:29). The survey results show that 63.5% of Khmer students regularly use the Khmer language for communication, and 35.5% of Khmer students sometimes use Khmer language. By contrast, only 1.0% of Khmer students never use Khmer language for communication. The use of the Khmer language for communication at school also impedes Khmer students in communicating with teachers and students who are not Khmer people and unable to use the Khmer language for communication.

In the behavioral relationship, greeting stands for people's attitudes. The survey data collected from 200 Southern Khmer students about their greeting towards teachers indicate that 85.0% of Southern Khmer students greet teachers based on their consciousness and respect for teachers, while 87.0% of Kinh students show the same attitudes. However, up to 15% of Khmer students consider teacher greeting as a countermeasure or a reluctance, and they think they do that to avoid teachers from offending, while 13.0% of Kinh students share the same idea.

#### *Regarding student-student behavioral relationship:*

In communication with their friends, Southern Khmer students often use pairs of personal pronouns such as: "tôi – bạn" ("I – You", formal way) (65.5%), proper name (19.0%), "tao – mày" ("I – You", informal way) (8.0%), "mình – bạn" ("I – you", friendly way) (5.5%), nicknames (1.5%) and "ông – bà" (slang for close friends) (0.5%). This result shows that most of the Khmer students address their classmates as "tôi – bạn" in a formal way. This shows respect towards other people in school. Meanwhile, for Kinh students, the way to address "tôi – bạn" in a formal way only accounts for 35.4%, and the way to address "tao – mày" in an informal way accounts for 26.4%.

Besides, swearing and using bad language among Khmer students inside and outside the school is also common. 2.0% of students regularly swear and use bad language. Also, 38.5% of students sometimes swear and use bad language, while 59.5% of students think that they do not swear or use bad language. Regarding students' awareness and attitude towards swearing and using bad language, 81% of Khmer students think that swearing or using bad language is an uncultured act. The percentage of Khmer students, who are aware that swearing or using bad language is an uncultured behavior, is higher than that of Kinh students (only 56.4%). However, 1.0% of Khmer students show their interest in swearing and using bad language, and approximately 18.0% of students are not interested in or indifferent to the swearing behavior of their friends at school. This shows that, although the majority of Khmer students are aware that swearing and using bad language is not consistent with the standards in the school as well as in the society, there are also many students who agree or are indifferent to swearing and using bad language in school. These are misperceptions that schools need to take measures to educate and correct students.

Regarding Khmer students' attitudes when making mistakes, with the question "What do you usually do when

you make mistakes with your friends?", the results showed that 91.0% of students answered "sincerely apologize", 1.5 % of students "reluctantly apologize", and 10.0% of students "do not apologize or ignore". This shows that most of the surveyed Khmer students sincerely apologize to other people when they make mistakes. However, a number of students are not really aware of their mistakes. If you know your mistake, you must apologize to the one whom you made your mistake. It is not only the cultured behavior of Khmer students, but also a good tradition of Vietnamese people.

The behavioral culture of Khmer students in the school is greatly influenced by the educational tradition of the family. Families are very important in shaping students' behavior patterns. Therefore, every daily action of parents has a direct influence on the formation of children's personality. Parents not only protect and care for their children, but also serve as exemplary moral and lifestyle examples for their children to follow. In educating children, Khmer people have the following proverb:

“Phải chiều con lúc lên năm  
Phải biết giáo dục lúc lên mười  
Đến tuổi mười sáu cần ghi nhớ  
Lời xưa đã dặn con là bạn

Dạy con phải tự giáo dục mình làm gương”

*(This proverb is understood as follows:*

*“You must pamper your children at the age of five  
You must know how to educate your children at the  
age of ten*

*By the age of sixteen, you need to remember that  
The old words tell that you should consider your  
children to be your friends*

*In order to teach your children, you must be  
examples.”)*

For Khmer families where violence exists, where parents are often quarrelsome, abusive, or ignorant and uncontrollable, they consider beating their children as their right. Parents of those families are usually upset, worried and even lashing out at their children when they are at fault. For students who have to witness and live in families with frequent violence and quarrels, their mind and health are greatly affected. Parents are so busy with work, in many families, they rarely have time to directly care and share with their children. Parents can only care about their children by providing them with adequate material, pampering them too much and delegating the responsibility of educating their children to schools and teachers. It can be said that family violence, the indifference, or the excessive and rigid concern of parents, or even the fact that parents are only interested in their children's learning, leading to the lack of affection, frustration in psychology, and deviations in actions and behavior of current Khmer students. These are the seeds for school violence and uncultured behavior in society.

#### *Regarding students' behavior towards themselves:*

The survey also found that the majority of today Southern Khmer students have the right perception of themselves. This is reflected in the learning process of students. Students are properly cared for by the school, family and society, so they

strive to achieve good academic results even though there are cases of students living in difficult families, they still have a sense of striving to be better in learning. It is shown that, through collected data, the number of Khmer students at Luong Hoa A Secondary and Upper - secondary School achieving excellent academic performance account for 26.3%, good academic achievement 40.7%, and average academic achievement 52.7%. Thereby, it is determined by the researchers that the Khmer students in this study have good sense of learning, are aware and responsible for themselves. However, there are still a large number of Khmer students who do not care about themselves and lack responsibility in learning, leading to low academic results and even dropping out of school. Along with dropping out of school, many students have deviant lifestyles and unethical behavior, and the worse consequences would be that they may break the law.

In addition to the manifestations of cultural behaviors, a number of Khmer students at school have uncultured behaviors such as being pragmatic, having no ideals, and attaching much importance to material values rather than spiritual values, living loosely, falling into social evils, violating traffic laws, having inappropriate attitudes towards the elderly, and acting inappropriately in public places. These are completely manifestations of a strange and wrong way of life, contrary to the cultural traditions of the Khmer people in particular and the Vietnamese in general.

#### *Proposed solutions*

In order to maintain and improve the behavior culture for Southern Khmer students in schools, the authors believe that schools need to synchronously implement many solutions.

First, school administrators, teachers and staff should be examples in all behaviors. Teachers must be strict, fair and objective in assessing students. Each teacher should really be an exceptional example for students to follow.

Second, in addition to the issued code of behavior rules for students, the schools also need to ask students to sign a commitment for good implementation of that code of rules in order to achieve school cultural settings.

Third, the Youth Union needs to organize extracurricular activities, seminars, or contests about life skills, behavior, and communications for Khmer students in the South of Vietnam. These are opportunities for students to learn the rules, standards, and behavioral patterns in school behavior, and also to practice communication and behavior skills in specific contexts. These activities will convey gentle and highly educational messages about behavior between students and teachers, between students and students, and especially between Khmer students and students from other ethnic groups. In recess radio programs, the Youth Union needs to build broadcast news programs with content related to education of behavior culture in schools. For schools with a large number of Khmer students, radio programs need to be conducted in both languages, Khmer and Vietnamese.

Fourth, contents of behavior culture and communications should be adopted into the annual moral and conduct classification of students, and the class. Thereby, students should be more aware of moral training and improving and be

aware of behavior. Language of behavior has to be cultured, suitable to the ethics and lifestyle of students, and of the national culture. Also, students should know how to show their concern and encouragement in a timely manner to other people.

Fifth, the schools need to cooperate with families, local political and social organizations and local unions in order to build up a cultural behavior setting and promote the cultural traditions of Vietnam in building the behavior culture of students in schools.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The research findings on school behavior culture of Khmer students indicate that a majority of Khmer students have a sense of compliance with standards and behavioral patterns in their behavior at school. The results also show that there are differences in behavior culture between Khmer students and Kinh students in several aspects such as the way how to address themselves and the way how to show the attitudes towards uncultured behavior. This discrepancy is due to the different cultural traditions between the two ethnic groups.

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