

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE STUDY OF ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS: A SURVEY OF THE BOARDING ETHNIC HIGH SCHOOL IN SINH PHINH COMMUNE, TUA CHUA DISTRICT, DIEN BIEN PROVINCE.

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Abstract

Tua Chua District, Dien Bien Province is a mountainous district with a significant population of ethnic minorities facing socioeconomic difficulties. The Boarding Ethnic Middle School (BEMS) is a specialized school established by the government to provide educational opportunities for ethnic minority students. We conducted a survey using a questionnaire with 228 students and 30 administrative staff and teachers, combined with interviews and observations, to investigate the psychological difficulties, manifestations of psychological difficulties, and counseling needs in the study of students at BEMS in Sinh Phinh Commune, Tua Chua District, Dien Bien Province. The research results have confirmed that ethnic minority students at the school face difficulties in determining learning motivation, utilizing learning methods, and interacting with teachers and peers in their studies. Students have counseling needs in assessing their learning process, planning effective study strategies, and seeking guidance on effective learning methods. Although our study focuses on a specific school, it can provide useful reference information for administrators and teachers in similar conditions and serve as valuable insight for researchers studying the practical psychological difficulties in the study of students in a specific locality.

Keywords: *psychological difficulties, study, ethnic minority students, boarding ethnic school, Tua Chua District, Dien Bien Province.*

1. Introduction

"Psychological difficulties" is a term that has gained attention and research interest from many scholars. According to the Vietnamese dictionary, "khó khăn" means obstacles or hindrances (Hoàng Phê, 1994). Authors Lư Thị Thảo (2018) and Phạm Thị Phương Thảo (2021) state that "psychological difficulties are the psychological states that manifest as excessive passivity of the subject, causing obstacles in taking action." Authors Nguyễn Thanh Bình (1996) and Nguyễn Phương Lan (2012) define "psychological difficulties" as the psychological factors that create difficulties for the subject in carrying out a certain activity, encompassing all individual psychological characteristics and inappropriate behavioral responses to the content, target, and context of communication. Although there are various definitions of psychological difficulties, in general, authors agree that these are

psychological factors that hinder an individual's activities and reduce their effectiveness. We perceive "psychological difficulties" as the entirety of psychological factors that arise during the activity, not aligned with the requirements of the activity, impeding the process and resulting in reduced effectiveness; these difficulties manifest during the subject's participation in the activity.

"The adolescence stage in lower secondary school is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, marked by rapid and significant changes in the psychological and physiological factors of students" (Trần Thị Minh Đức, 2009). During this stage, students in lower secondary school face many psychological difficulties in their relationships with friends, teachers, and family, as well as in self-awareness for personal development. One of the challenges that many students encounter is in their studies, as it is the primary activity within the school setting. Psychological difficulties in studying refer to "the psychological factors that are not in line with the requirements of the learning activity, impeding the student's learning process, leading to ineffective learning. They are expressed through the ability to adapt to the components of the learning activity, interest and motivation in studying, and the ability to interact in the learning process" (Phạm Thị Phương Thảo, 2021).

Tua Chua District, Dien Bien Province, is a mountainous area that faces various socioeconomic challenges. The ethnic minority population accounts for 95% of the total population. The students in the Boarding Ethnic Middle Schools belong to different ethnic groups such as Mong, Thai, Kinh, Khơ Mú, Dao, etc. Among them, Mong students make up 73%.

Sinh Phinh Boarding Ethnic Middle School in Tua Chua District has a 100% Mong ethnic student population. Students here are the main labor force in their families, with parents having low educational levels and limited study resources. Consequently, students face many psychological difficulties in their studies. This research aims to identify the psychological difficulties experienced by students, the influencing factors, and their counseling needs. The findings will serve as a basis for school principals to develop effective counseling activities for students.

This article presents the research results on the current situation of psychological difficulties, their manifestations, influencing factors, and counseling needs of students at Sinh Phinh Boarding Ethnic Middle School in Tua Chua District, Dien Bien Province.

2. Research Results

2.1. Some issues regarding the psychological difficulties of minority ethnic students in learning.

Minority ethnic students are students belonging to ethnic groups with smaller populations compared to the majority ethnic group within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Government, 2011). Specialized schools for ethnic minority students are established by the State to provide education for the children of these minority ethnic groups and the children of ethnic groups residing long-term in economically and socially disadvantaged areas, aiming to contribute to the training of personnel for these regions (Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, 2010).

Most minority ethnic students are born and raised in mountainous, remote, and economically and socially challenging areas. Therefore, they face specific difficulties in their learning process, including:

- Lack of learning motivation: Many students have the mindset of completing education only until the end of grade 9 and then seeking employment. They are often the main labor force for their families and do not set higher educational goals.
- Passivity in learning: Students lack the ability to plan their studies scientifically and take incomplete notes. Due to limitations in Vietnamese language proficiency, many students have poor listening comprehension and struggle to express their answers.
- In interpersonal interactions, students often experience fear, embarrassment, and difficulty understanding lessons but hesitate to ask teachers or peers for help.

Each student may exhibit varying degrees of these difficulties. Teachers need to understand the level of difficulty for each student in order to provide appropriate guidance and support.

2.2. Survey organization

The survey aims to identify the current situation of psychological difficulties in learning, the influencing factors, and the educational counseling needs of minority ethnic students at the Specialized Ethnic Minority Boarding Middle School in Sinh Phinh, Tua Chua district, Dien Bien province. This serves as a practical basis for proposing measures to organize educational counseling activities for students by the school principal.

The survey sample consists of 258 individuals, including 228 students, 01 principal, 02 vice principals, and 27 teachers of the Specialized Ethnic Minority Boarding Middle School in Sinh Phinh. We used questionnaires and survey items rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from low to high, corresponding to scores from 1 to 5. We combined this with observation, non-structured interviews with some teachers and students. The research was conducted from March 2023 to May 2023.

To determine the distance between the levels of the measurement scale, the author calculated the scale points using the formula: (Maximum score - Minimum score) / Number of levels. Thus, the scale distance is: $(5-1) / 5 = 0.8$ points.

- Level 1 (never, no impact, not necessary): from 1 – 1.8.
- Level 2 (rarely, low impact, less necessary): from 1.81 – 2.6.
- Level 3 (sometimes, hesitating): from 2.61 – 3.4.
- Level 4 (often, significant impact, necessary): from 3.41 – 4.2.
- Level 5 (very often, completely influential, highly necessary): from 4.21 – 5.

- The average score for each item in the questionnaires is calculated using the formula:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x_i k_i}{n}$$

In this case: \bar{x} is the average value of each criterion for a specific issue; x_i is the score for each criterion ($x_1 = 3$, $x_2 = 2$, $x_3 = 1$); k_i is the number of people giving a score for each criterion; n is the total number of participants in the evaluation ($n = k_1 + k_2 + k_3$).

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum \bar{x}_i}{N}$$

The general overall average value for each questionnaire is calculated using the formula:

In this case: \bar{X} is the average value for an issue, \bar{x} is the average value for each criterion, and N is the total number of criteria for an issue.

2.3. Survey Results and Discussion

2.3.1. Current situation of the level of difficulties in learning among students at the Specialized Ethnic Minority Boarding Middle School in Sinh Phinh, Tua Chua district, Dien Bien province.

To understand the current situation of psychological difficulties in learning among students, we presented the difficulties in learning and sought opinions on the frequency of occurrence from "never" to "very often." The survey results are as follows:

Table 1: Survey results of students' opinions on the level of psychological difficulties in learning (total of 228 students)

| No | Difficulties | Level | | | | | Average scores | Ranking |
|----------|---|-------|--------|-----------|-------|------------|----------------|-------------|
| | | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Very Often | | |
| 1 | Difficulty in determining learning motivation | | | | | | | 2,80 |
| 1.1 | Only study enough to finish secondary school and then work | 16 | 16 | 65 | 62 | 69 | 3,67 | 3 |
| 1.2 | Prefer browsing the internet, chatting with friends, playing games rather than studying | 46 | 76 | 38 | 42 | 26 | 2,68 | 11 |
| 1.3 | Do not see the practical significance of studying for oneself | 82 | 52 | 48 | 34 | 22 | 2,42 | 14 |
| 1.4 | Feel that one lacks learning ability | 16 | 113 | 86 | 6 | 7 | 2,45 | 13 |
| 2 | Difficulty in learning methods | | | | | | | 3,26 |
| 2.1 | Don't know where to start when studying on my own | 25 | 79 | 67 | 34 | 23 | 2,79 | 10 |
| 2.2 | Cannot memorize the content of the lessons | 22 | 24 | 58 | 65 | 59 | 3,50 | 7 |
| 2.3 | Too many subjects, too many exercises, but little time for self-study | 9 | 11 | 35 | 48 | 125 | 4,18 | 1 |
| 2.4 | Don't know how to take notes in class effectively | 23 | 46 | 82 | 68 | 9 | 2,97 | 8 |
| 2.5 | Unable to take notes quickly in accordance with the teacher's requirements | 38 | 123 | 19 | 32 | 16 | 2,41 | 15 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------|--|----|----|----|----|-----|-------------|-------------|
| 2.6 | Worried when the teacher asks questions because I don't understand the questions | 39 | 52 | 55 | 45 | 37 | 2,95 | 9 |
| 2.7 | Understand the teacher's questions but don't know how to express them | 11 | 21 | 35 | 52 | 109 | 4,00 | 2 |
| 3 | Difficulty in learning interaction | | | | | | | 3,32 |
| 3.1 | Do not understand the lesson but dare not ask the teacher | 28 | 32 | 30 | 51 | 87 | 3,60 | 4 |
| 3.2 | Hesitate, feel embarrassed to ask a classmate for help or to explain a lesson | 9 | 11 | 79 | 95 | 34 | 3,59 | 5 |
| 3.3 | Do not speak up during discussions for fear of being wrong | 45 | 63 | 83 | 29 | 8 | 2,53 | 12 |
| 3.4 | Don't know how to help a friend when they have difficulties in learning | 26 | 23 | 39 | 79 | 61 | 3,55 | 6 |
| | Overall Average | | | | | | 3,15 | |

Based on the data, it is evident that students at PTDTBT THCS Sinh Phình School face difficulties in their studies (with an overall average of 3.15). However, the level of difficulty varies across different areas.

In terms of learning areas, students encounter the most challenges in learning interaction with peers and teachers (average 3.32), followed by difficulties in learning methods (average 3.26), and they face relatively fewer difficulties in determining learning motivation (average 2.80).

When examining specific aspects, the highest levels of difficulty for students are found in the following areas: "Too many subjects, too many exercises, but little time for self-study" (average 4.18) and "Understanding the teacher's questions but not knowing how to express them" (average 4.0). Many students frequently have thoughts such as "Only study enough to finish middle school and then work" (average 3.67), "Do not understand the lesson but dare not ask the teacher" (average 3.6), "Hesitate, feel embarrassed to ask a classmate for help or to explain a lesson" (average 3.59), and "Don't know how to help a friend when they have difficulties in learning" (average 3.55).

On the other hand, students face fewer difficulties in the following areas: "Do not speak up during discussions for fear of being wrong" (average 2.53), "Feel that one lacks learning ability" (average 2.45), "Do not see the practical significance of studying for oneself" (average 2.42), and "Unable to take notes quickly in accordance with the teacher's requirements" (average 2.41).

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind these difficulties, conversations were held with students and teachers. From these exchanges, it was observed that students at Sinh Phình Boarding Ethnic Secondary School are diligent, respectful, hardworking, and responsible in their studies. They actively participate in class discussions. However, as students from the Mông ethnic group, they are the primary labor force in their families, and they dedicate a significant amount of time to helping with household chores alongside their studies. Limited proficiency in the Vietnamese language and lack of access to books and newspapers restrict their expressive abilities. Additionally, most students engage in agricultural activities after school, which limits their motivation for learning.

These difficulties manifest in the attitudes and behaviors of students in their studies. The opinions of teachers were sought regarding the expressions of these difficulties among students.

2.3.2. Current Status of Expressing Learning Difficulties among Students at Sính Phình Boarding Ethnic Secondary School, Tủa Chùa District, Điện Biên Province.

To understand the extent of psychological difficulties expressed by students in their studies, we assessed the expressions of students in their classroom learning and sought the opinions of teachers regarding the frequency of these expressions, ranging from "never" to "very often." The survey results are as follows:

Table 2: Survey Results of Opinions from Management Staff and Teachers Regarding the Expression of Learning Difficulties among Students (total of 30 management staff and teachers)

| No | BEHAVIOR | Level | | | | | Average scores | Ranking |
|----|---|-------|--------|--------------|------------|-----------------|----------------|---------|
| | | Never | Rarely | Occasionally | Frequently | Very Frequently | | |
| 1 | Failure to review previous lessons before class | 2 | 4 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 3,43 | 2 |
| 2 | Failure to read and prepare for new lessons before class | 0 | 4 | 11 | 8 | 7 | 3,60 | 1 |
| 3 | Inattentiveness, sleeping during class | 3 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 3,10 | 4 |
| 4 | Talking and engaging in personal activities during class | 5 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 2,77 | 6 |
| 5 | Failure to raise hand for participation | 2 | 5 | 11 | 9 | 3 | 3,20 | 3 |
| 6 | Failure to answer questions, not completing assigned tasks by the teacher | 4 | 4 | 13 | 6 | 3 | 3,00 | 5 |
| | Overall average score | | | | | | 3,18 | |

The survey results show that students at the Sính Phình Boarding Ethnic Secondary School face occasional psychological difficulties in their studies (with an overall average score of 3.18). The frequent manifestations are: Failure to read and prepare for new lessons before class (with an average score of 3.6); Failure to review previous lessons before class (with an average score of 3.43). In an interview with Principal P.V.L of our school, we learned that "100% of the students at the Sính Phình Boarding Ethnic Secondary School are of the Mong ethnic group. They have to spend a lot of time helping their families with farming tasks, so they often neglect doing homework and preparing for new lessons before class. Additionally, the cultural literacy of the students' parents is not high, and their agricultural economy is underdeveloped with low incomes, so they do not pay much attention to and invest in their children's education."

Although the students' preparation for class is not satisfactory, observations during class show that their lack of focus is only occasional: Inattentiveness, sleeping during class (with an average score of 3.1); Talking and engaging in personal activities during class (with an average score of 2.77). The negative behaviors during class also occur only occasionally: Failure to raise hand for participation (with an average score of 3.2); Failure to answer questions, not completing assigned tasks by the teacher (with an average score of 3.0). In an interview with Teacher Trần Thị N., who has 8 years of teaching experience at the school (including 6 years as a homeroom teacher) and specializes in teaching Vietnamese literature, we learned about the difficulties of students in the classroom. She said, "The students are well-behaved in class and follow the teacher's pedagogical organization. Despite having to spend a lot of time working to help their families, they try their best to listen, take notes, and rarely lose focus or sleep during class. However, the students are still quite passive in class, only taking notes on the content written on the board by the teacher, and they do not actively participate or work in groups."

Based on the observations of study difficulties and their manifestations, we asked the students about their needs for academic counseling and support.

2.3.3. The current situation of academic counseling needs among students at the Sinh Phình Boarding Ethnic Secondary School, Tủa Chùa district, Điện Biên province.

To understand the students' needs for academic counseling, we conducted a survey with 228 students and interviewed a group of 15 students. The survey results are as follows:

Table 3: Survey results of students' opinions on their academic counseling needs

(total of 228 students)

| No | BEHAVIOR | Level | | | | | Average scores | Ranking |
|----|---|---------------|----------------|------------------------|-----------|------------------|----------------|---------|
| | | Not Necessary | Less Necessary | Uncertain in Necessary | Necessary | Highly Necessary | | |
| 1 | Guidance on self-assessment of the learning process | 2 | 8 | 41 | 59 | 118 | 4,24 | 1 |
| 2 | Guidance on collaborative work with peers in studying | 15 | 26 | 63 | 69 | 55 | 3,54 | 4 |
| 3 | Guidance on effective self-study | 0 | 21 | 38 | 110 | 59 | 3,91 | 2 |
| 4 | Guidance on listening to lectures and taking notes in class | 15 | 47 | 56 | 69 | 41 | 3,32 | 6 |
| 5 | Guidance on scientific study planning | 8 | 33 | 72 | 87 | 28 | 3,41 | 5 |
| 6 | Guidance on organizing study according to chosen career orientation | 7 | 22 | 65 | 91 | 43 | 3,62 | 3 |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|-------------|
| | Overall average score | | | | | | 3,67 |
|--|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|-------------|

Based on the survey results, it is evident that students have a need for guidance and support from teachers to overcome psychological difficulties in their studies. Among these, the most pressing need identified by students is for teachers to "Guide them on how to self-assess their learning process" (average score 4.24). The interviewed students in the group also agreed with the statement made by Thao Thi P. (8C class): "We don't know how to evaluate our learning. Why do we study diligently but not achieve high results? What aspects of our study methods need improvement? We hope that teachers can guide us on how to assess our learning effectively."

Advice on effective study methods in self-study planning, collaboration with peers in studying, and choosing a career-oriented learning approach were assessed as necessary (average scores ranging from 3.41 to 3.91).

Conclusion:

This research exploring the psychological difficulties in studying and the counseling support needs of students is of significant importance in improving the quality of education in the school. It is particularly crucial for ethnic minority students in boarding secondary schools like the Ethnic Boarding Secondary School Sính Phình in Tủa Chùa district, Điện Biên province. Our study on the psychological difficulties in studying among ethnic minority students in this school indicates that these students have shown efforts in their studies, as reflected in their positive learning attitudes and consciousness. However, there are still various psychological difficulties in terms of identifying learning motivations, utilizing study methods, and engaging in learning interactions. These difficulties are partly attributed to the students' cognitive capacity and lack of learning motivation and partly to the challenging economic conditions of their families and the highland region.

Students expressed a desire for specific and detailed guidance on evaluating their learning, planning their studies, and adopting effective study methods. While our research focused on a specific school, the findings can serve as a valuable reference for educational administrators and teachers in similar conditions and provide useful information for researchers studying the psychological difficulties faced by students in specific localities.

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