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Article abstract

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Environmental Education in Vietnam: A Critical Discourse Analysis

L'éducation environnementale au Viêtnam : une analyse critique du discours

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Abstract

This article utilizes critical discourse analysis to investigate the environmental education (EE) policy in Vietnam by analyzing seven policy documents. It examines the language used in the policy papers and underlying factors that shape the policy, including power relations, ideologies, and sociopolitical influences. The findings reveal a lack of shared understanding of EE and the neglect of its social aspect, leading to limited integration of EE content in national curricula and the prevalence of performative language within the policy. This undervaluation of EE can be attributed to the influence of Confucianism and the traditional education model inherited from the former Soviet Union. It also suggests that the present policy predominantly reflects the ideologies and priorities of the ruling class, who prioritizes economic growth over sustainability. This study underscores the need for a nuanced approach in policymaking that integrates sociocultural dimensions and addresses the performative gap in environmental education, paving the way for more effective and context-sensitive strategies in Vietnam's response to educational challenges posed by climate change.

Résumé

Cet article utilise l'analyse critique du discours pour examiner la politique d'Éducation environnementale (EE) au Viêtnam en analysant sept documents de politiques. Il examine le langage utilisé dans les documents de politique et les facteurs sous-jacents qui la façonnent, y compris les relations de pouvoir, les idéologies et les influences sociopolitiques. Les résultats révèlent un manque de compréhension commune de l'EE et la négligence de son aspect social, ce qui conduit à une intégration limitée du contenu de l'EE dans les programmes scolaires nationaux et à la prédominance d'un langage performatif dans la politique. Cette sous-évaluation de l'éducation environnementale peut être attribuée à l'influence du confucianisme et du modèle éducatif traditionnel hérité de l'ex-Union soviétique. Elle suggère également que la politique actuelle reflète principalement les idéologies et les priorités de la classe dirigeante qui privilégie la croissance économique au détriment de la durabilité. Cette étude souligne la nécessité d'une approche nuancée dans l'élaboration de politiques qui intègre les dimensions socioculturelles et traite l'écart performatif dans l'EE, ouvrant ainsi la voie à des stratégies plus efficaces et plus sensibles au contexte dans la réponse du Viêtnam aux défis éducatifs posés par le changement climatique

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, environmental education, policy-implementation gap, policymaking, sociopolitical influences, Vietnam

Mots clés : analyse critique du discours, éducation environnementale, écart entre les politiques et leur mise en œuvre, élaboration de politiques, influences sociopolitiques, Viêtnam

Introduction

The Mekong Delta in Vietnam is one of the world's largest river deltas, having evolved over the past 6,000 years. However, over the last 30 years, rapid climate change has led to its swift degradation, posing a severe risk of complete disappearance within a century (Chapman & Van, 2018; MONRE, 2016). This not only demands urgent intervention but also results in significant disruptions in the lives of its residents. Reports have highlighted the profound impact of climate change and natural disasters on the education of students, particularly those from low-income families and those residing in rural areas, characteristics that align with a majority of students in

the Mekong Delta (Mission Alliance, n.d.). Furthermore, the economic hardships caused by climate change and natural disasters often lead to school interruptions and dropouts, with a disproportionate effect on female students who typically bear greater household responsibilities than their male counterparts (Kwauk & Braga, 2017). Natural disasters also have devastating consequences on school infrastructure, further disrupting children's education (Chuang et al., 2018). Additionally, climate-induced migration poses a significant threat to children's education, resulting in academic disruptions due to school transfers, limited learning opportunities caused by policy and social constraints at their new destinations, and often, poor academic performance along with underdeveloped socio-emotional skills due to reduced parental engagement (MDRI, 2022). These impacts turn the displaced students into "dual victims," who experience both the effects of climate and natural crises in their homelands and challenges in their new learning environments.

To address these challenges effectively, there is a crucial need to educate people about the consequences of climate change and equip them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to respond to this crisis. Numerous studies emphasize the vital role of education, particularly climate change education or environmental education (EE) in schools, in addressing the complexities of climate change (Mochizuki & Bryan, 2015). However, it is essential to recognize that disadvantaged populations in Vietnam, who are already experiencing multiple forms of deprivation, often struggle to fully realize and leverage the potential of education for adapting to climate change (MDRI, 2022; The Asia Foundation, 2021).

This article, therefore, seeks to investigate the formulation and implementation of EE policy in Vietnam to comprehend why it may not be effective in assisting students affected by climate change in coping with its adverse consequences, while initiatives to incorporate EE into formal curricula at all educational levels were introduced by the government in the 1990s (GEEP, 2020). Specifically, it aims to address the research question: How is environmental education policy formulated and implemented in Vietnam? To answer this question, I will examine two sub-questions: (1) How is EE in Vietnam perceived and characterized? and (2) How is EE policy formulated, developed, and implemented in Vietnam, and who are the stakeholders involved in this process?

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This article employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) and its tripartite analysis framework (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2012) (see Table 1). Through an examination of the text and language of policy documents issued by the Vietnamese government (*micro* level), the study seeks to understand how EE is conceptualized and defined in the country, as well as its scope and characteristics. CDA also enables an analysis that goes beyond the text to unveil underlying factors not explicitly presented in the documents but significantly influencing and shaping the comprehension of EE, along with its development and implementation in Vietnam (*meso* and *macro* levels). In the exploration of the impact of these external factors, this article adopts the conceptual framework of political ecology of education (PEE) (Hurrell, 2006; Meek, 2015; Meek & Llorca-Bidart, 2017) to illuminate "how power relations, political-economic processes, and their structural arrangements mediate education" (Meek & Llorca-Bidart, 2017, p. 213).

Table 1*Fairclough's CDA Framework*

Dimensions	Analysis Approach
Discourse-as-text (micro level) practice: analysis of the linguistic features of texts (including verbal, visual, or verbal and visual texts).	Text analysis (description): researchers use systematic ways of looking closely at text.
Discourse-as-discursive practice (meso level): analysis of the production (writing/speaking/designing), distribution (texts/ symbols/images), and consumption of texts (reading/listening/viewing).	Processing analysis (interpretation): researchers distance themselves from the text, looking for ways that the larger discourses or ideologies are realized in and produced by the text.
Discourse-as-social practice (macro level): analysis of the sociohistorical conditions which govern these processes, of power/knowledge relations in society that are “external” to the text but are reflected in it and reinforced by it.	Social analysis (explanation): researchers move further from the text, to explain how the text and discourses make sense within the larger social context of a certain time and place.

Analysis and Findings

At the *micro* level, the analysis focused on examining seven key official documents issued by Vietnamese authorities (see Table 2). Two cycles of coding were employed to examine these documents: (1) co-occurrence analysis to identify instances where the term “education” (*giáo dục*) co-occurred with terms such as “environment” (*môi trường*), “environmental protection” (*bảo vệ môi trường*), “sustainability” (*bền vững*), or “sustainable development” (*phát triển bền vững*); and (2) magnitude analysis to capture the frequency, intensity, and presence of specific plans or guidelines for integrating EE into the educational system and curricula, recorded by magnitude scores (see Table 3).

Table 2*Policy Documents*

Document Title	Publisher	Date
Education Law 2019	The National Assembly	Last modified June 14, 2019
Law on Environmental Protection 2022	The Office of the National Assembly	Last modified December 29, 2022
Decree—Elaboration of Several Articles of the Law on Environmental Protection	The Government	January 10, 2022
National Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda	The Office of the Prime Minister	May 10, 2017

Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy for 2011–2020	The Prime Minister	April 12, 2012
Decision on Approval of the Project “Integrating Environmental Protection Content into the National System” (Vietnamese)	The Prime Minister	October 17, 2001
2021 National Environment Report (Vietnamese)	The Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment	May 4, 2022

Table 3

EE Integration Plan Magnitude Scale (Adapted from Essa & Harvey, 2022)

Score	Description
0	No mention of EE
1	Very general information about EE or environmental protection
2	Mention of limited details about the integration of EE in the educational system and curriculum
3	Detailed description such as strategic plans or steps regarding the integration of EE into the educational system and curriculum

The analysis demonstrated that the co-occurrences of “education” with terms like “sustainability,” “sustainable development,” and “environmental protection” were limited in the policy documents compared to the document length (see Table 4). The term “climate change education” was not found in any documents. Instead, various terms such as “environmental education,” “education for sustainable development,” and “education for environmental protection” (EfEP) were inconsistently used in different texts, with EfEP being the most prevalent. The absence of a standardized definition for these terms could lead to limited comprehension and nonuniform approaches among teachers and school administrators. Consequently, the integration of EE content in classrooms, while limited, exhibited significant variations between schools and even between classes within the same school (Hoang & Kato, 2016; Nguyen, 2018). Moreover, by using EfEP to refer to environmental education, the current policy documents tended to focus on the natural and ecological aspects of EE while neglecting the social, spiritual, and health dimensions. Key elements such as social justice, climate justice, and the impacts of climate change on marginalized groups were also overlooked in these documents.

Among the seven analyzed documents, only one (P6) provided a detailed explanation of integrating EE content into the national education system. However, the actual content was brief and directive, lacking detailed strategic plans or steps for an EE integration plan. Despite being comprehensive in approach, it can be viewed as more of a guiding document than a comprehensive plan, as it is only three pages long. Moreover, since its issuance in 2001, there have been no replacement plans or publicly available reports on the outcomes of its implementation.

The remaining documents, produced after 2001, received magnitude scores of 0–1, indicating limited or no information about an EE integration plan (see Table 4). The term

“education” in these documents often appeared in the context of public awareness campaigns for environmental protection (i.e., “educating” public awareness), rather than emphasizing the development of EE within the school system. When EE integration into the curriculum is mentioned, it was typically limited to a single sentence highlighting the need to integrate environmental protection knowledge and laws into the educational programs, without providing specific guidelines. In other words, the documents mainly emphasized bureaucratic actions rather than providing a comprehensive strategic plan with clear instructions. This vagueness reflected a lack of commitment from the government in developing an EE integration plan, resulting in performative policy language.

Table 4

Co-Occurrences and Magnitude Scores of EE Integration in the Examined Policy Documents

Code	Policy document	Co-Occurrences	Magnitude (Assigned score)
P1	Education Law 2019 (45 pages; 22,193 words)	0	0
P2	Law on Environmental Protection 2022 (134 pages; 66,709 words)	3	1
P3	Decree—Elaboration of Several Articles of the Law on Environmental Protection (215 pages; 114,385 words)	9	1
P4	National Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (88 pages; 31,028 words)	4	1
P5	Viet Nam Sustainable Development Strategy for 2011–2020 (9 pages; 5,490 words)	3	1
P6	Decision on Approval of the Project “Integrating Environmental Protection Content into the National System” (Vietnamese) (3 pages; 1,262 words)	7	2
P7	2021 National Environment Report (Vietnamese) (95 pages; 42,805 words)	5	1

Going Beyond the Text

As policy documents construct a particular view of reality and are influenced by the perspectives and goals of their authors and target audiences (Chambers, 2009), it is essential to explore the underlying assumptions, values, and discursive strategies that shape them. This requires employing the *meso* and *macro* levels of CDA to examine the broader societal and political contexts. In this sense, the framework of political ecology of education is utilized for understanding “how the reciprocal relations between political economic forces influence educational priorities affecting the production, dissemination, and contestation of environmental knowledge at various interconnected scales” (Meek, 2015, p. 448).

Particularly, the framework helps offer valuable insights into power dynamics and their negotiation throughout the process of making, developing, distributing, and implementing the EE policy (*meso* level). In the context of Vietnam’s top-down administrative model, characterized by

an emphasis on obedience and limited tolerance for dissent, power distribution often hinders open and meaningful dialogues, creating a climate of fear among lower-level contributors who seek to advocate for policy changes (Nghia, 2005). Additionally, the policymaking process in Vietnam is often opaque as a “black box,” with limited transparency regarding procedures, discussions, stakeholders, or any relevant interest groups (Lan, 2016). This raises important questions about the representation and inclusiveness of marginalized groups, who bear the brunt of climate change and environmental disasters, in the formulation and implementation of the EE policy.

The analysis of seven policy documents also revealed a strong emphasis on economic development, industrialization, modernization, and international integration, reflecting the government’s prioritization of global competitiveness and adherence to neoliberal values (Bengtsson, 2016). This underscores the country’s ideology in education and aligns with other policy analyses which emphasize the government’s prioritization of science and technology as key drivers of progress (Thuy, 2021). Notably, the Education Law 2019, the highest-level governing document for education in Vietnam, does not explicitly mention EE, while emphasizing the importance of science and technology in education and highlighting their role in the country’s economic growth and international integration. Consequently, EE is undervalued, as it is not perceived as a direct contribution to the country’s industrialization and modernization efforts for international integration (Thuy, 2021).

Taking a deeper look, the *macro-level* analysis examines the historical and cultural factors that have shaped Vietnam’s educational policies and practices. Confucianism, shaped by centuries of Sinicization in Vietnam, has influenced the country’s educational philosophy with a focus on education as a means for serving the national interests and meeting construction and defense requirements of the country (Tho, 2016). As a result, sectors aligned with the development priorities (e.g., modernization, industrialization, and international integration) would receive greater emphasis. This approach highlights the pragmatic and phased nature of Vietnamese education, with priorities adapting to the country’s developmental needs at each different stage. Furthermore, after gaining independence from French colonial rule in 1945, Vietnam received substantial support from the former Soviet Union, a leader of the Communist bloc, for post-war reconstruction. Consequently, the Vietnamese education system inherited traits from the former Soviet model, with a notable emphasis on technical and heavy industry fields (Pham & Fry, 2004). This emphasis persists today, with traditional disciplines like engineering, mechanics, and applied sciences receiving more recognition, overshadowing social sciences, humanities, and emerging fields like environmental studies. These factors contribute to the chronic undervaluation of EE.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the potential bias and subjectivity introduced by the researcher’s application of CDA, which may influence the analysis (van Dijk, 1993). To mitigate this limitation, it would be valuable to incorporate additional sources of information, such as interviews with policymakers, school leaders, and teachers. These interviews can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the EE policy in Vietnam, including its perception, intention, and implementation. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to trace the dissemination of policy documents to lower levels of implementation. This examination can shed light on whether there are supplementary documents that provide further explanations and guidance for implementing these policies at the local and school levels. Exploring these additional documents can help identify variations in understanding, perception, implementation approaches, and prioritization of the same policies

across different localities or schools. By considering these variations, a broader and more nuanced perspective on EE policy and its implementation in Vietnam can be achieved.

Conclusion

This article utilized the CDA methodology to analyze seven policy documents and gain insights into the EE policy in Vietnam. The analysis examined the texts themselves, as well as the underlying factors that shape these policies, including power dynamics, ideologies, and sociopolitical influences as guided by the conceptual framework of political ecology of education.

The finding reveals that while the government acknowledges the importance of EE in addressing environmental issues in the long term, the effective implementation of integrating EE content into the national curricula remains limited, indicating performative elements in the policy language. Additionally, the social aspect of EE appears to be overlooked, as none of the policy documents address this aspect. At the same time, questions of accountability in policymaking arise, particularly regarding the representation of stakeholders, especially marginalized groups. This suggests that the current EE policy primarily reflects the ideologies and priorities of the ruling class, who prioritizes economic growth. In terms of ideology, education in Vietnam is seen as a means to serve national interests, carrying neoliberal values influenced by globalization at this moment. The undervaluation of EE compared to other fields can be attributed to impacts from Confucianism and the traditional education model inherited from the former Soviet Union. This highlights the imperative for a nuanced policymaking approach that incorporates sociocultural dimensions and bridges the performative gap in environmental education. Such an approach is essential for developing more effective and context-sensitive strategies in Vietnam's response to educational challenges posed by climate change. These strategies can serve as guidance for policymakers, educational institutions, and development organizations, helping them tailor policies to address the distinctive challenges faced by students, particularly in the context of lower- and middle-income countries like Vietnam. The ultimate goal is to achieve equitable education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal #4.

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