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Author(s)	荻巣, 崇世
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Bordering through (Un)Schooling: The Case of Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia

OGISU Takayo

This paper examines how minority groups are included in and excluded from school education from the perspectives of borders and bordering, drawing on the case of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. Under the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which promote “no one’s left behind,” schools and school education are expected to be inclusive for all. Such global norm is, however, an illusion because modern school education systems cannot avoid exclusion. As modern school education systems are run by and intended to serve the nation-state, the existence of children who live outside the framework of the nation-state, such as children who move across national borders on a daily basis, children who live transnationally as a result of their parents’ migration, and children who are undocumented or stateless, is not assumed, and therefore such children find themselves excluded from the system. Based on the fact that schooling itself is founded on the premise of exclusion of others, this paper aims to unpack contradictory role played by Cambodian schools and school education in drawing and redrawing imaginary borders against ethnic Vietnamese.

Based on the existing research in education and border studies, this paper identified and explored three interconnected issues: a) issues surrounding the physical Cambodia-Vietnam border, b) socially constructed bordering against ethnic Vietnamese residing in Cambodia, and c) inclusion and exclusion of ethnic Vietnamese through schooling. These three issues and the relationship among them were explored qualitatively based on a review of the literature, an analysis of interview data collected in four ethnic Vietnamese communities, and an analysis of lower secondary level social studies textbooks.

By reviewing the history of the physical Cambodia-Vietnam border, I detail that the tension between Cambodia and Vietnam over the lower Mekong Delta is a major factor in the emergence of (stateless) ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. More specifically, growing tension over the physical Cambodia-Vietnam border in the Mekong Delta after independence from the French colonial occupation, on the one hand, and the loose border control during 1980s till early 2000s, on the other, have enabled mostly undocumented migration of Vietnamese to Cambodia. They remain in Cambodia as “illegal migrants” and their descendants later become stateless.

Together with tensions over the physical border, popular anti-Vietnamese sentiments among Cambodians have also played an important role to constrain ethnic Vietnamese from sloughing off

their statelessness. Through legal, administrative, social, and cultural practices, ethnic Vietnamese have been denied the opportunity to naturalize or “Khmernize” themselves to gain Cambodian nationality. This means that ethnic Vietnamese are not eligible for various civil rights, including access to housing, employment, health and education services in their social life, and they are constantly reminded that they are “outsiders” and excluded from Cambodian society, even when they live far from the physical border.

In relation to both the physical Cambodia-Vietnam border and socially constructed “outsider” images held towards ethnic Vietnamese, schools and school education play two important roles. Firstly, as Cambodian school education is operated for Cambodian nationals, and as completing Cambodian public education is almost the only way for foreign residents to meet naturalization criteria, controlling enrolment in schools is part of a bordering process. Secondly, by producing, reproducing, and transmitting certain images of Vietnam, Vietnamese, and ethnic Vietnamese, school education also engages in the social construction of imaginary borders. An analysis of interview data reveals that schools draw practical boundaries that have higher permeability to ethnic Vietnamese children than officially defined in the Education Law. Furthermore, social studies textbooks either describe Vietnam and Vietnamese as a friendly neighbor rather than as an invader or a competitor, or keep silent on the stateless ethnic Vietnamese and disputes over the physical border. Such nuanced images of Vietnam, which reflect Hun Sen government’s political sensitivity, keep the ethnic Vietnamese invisible in society. Partial border images also limit the possibilities for children in the majority group to unlearn anti-Vietnamese images circulated in society. Schools and school education, therefore, do not have much power to transform the “outsider” images of ethnic Vietnamese, and thus end up perpetuating and reproducing the status quo.

This paper sheds light on the political processes of “bordering” in which schools and school education are involved. Educational literature has treated border issues as a mere context or background, and therefore failed to question how schools include/exclude certain group of people, or how schools engage in bordering processes. However, the findings presented in this paper point to the fact that schools and school education do more than just reproduce constructed images, as they continuously draw and redraw new boundaries that reflect the social and political context. The notion of “bordering” and “permeability” help us understand the inclusion-exclusion relationship not as a linear arrow from exclusion to inclusion, but as a fluid, reversible, and changing relationship reflecting factors outside of schools.