



Bản Sắc (identity) of Vietnamese Teachers in the Context of Education Reform – A Comparative Study

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List of Abbreviations

BOET: Bureau of Education and Training

BSCN: Bản sắc cá nhân

BSTT: Bản sắc tập thể

CPV: Communist Party of Vietnam

DOET: Department of Education and Training

ESL: English as a Second Language

FDG: Focus Group Discussion

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

IB: International Baccalaureate

MOET: Ministry of Education and Training

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

List of Vietnamese Cultural Expressions

Lễ phép (Well-behaved): an appropriate attitude toward older people, using appropriate language, showing gratitude, politeness, manners, and respect.

Thuần phong mỹ tục (Fine customs): A Vietnamese proverb that refers to all the good and healthy customs, traditions, moral concepts, and lifestyles of a nation. “Thuần phong”: pure customs; “mỹ tục”: beautiful, fine, or good customs/ traditions.

Tôn sư trọng đạo (Respecting the teachers): A Vietnamese proverb reflecting high societal standing of teachers.

Declaration

I have read and understood the Departmental policy on plagiarism.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Signature: 

Date: 16 June 2025

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Summary

This comparative study explores the *bản sắc* (identity) among teachers in the public and international schools within the context of Vietnam's education reforms, particularly Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP. The reform echoes the global education agendas on policies as it aims to align the national education with international standards. Moreover, the rapid expansion of international schools in Vietnam (ISC Research, 2025a), have steered the education toward privatisation, suggesting the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism in the education landscape. Within this context, this study explores how teachers perceive themselves, focusing on two research questions:

How do public school and international school teachers perceive their *bản sắc* in the work environment and Vietnamese society?

How has Vietnam's education reform shaped teachers' *bản sắc*?

To stay true to the local experiences, the study uses Vietnamese concept – *bản sắc* – and study it as embedded in Vietnamese collectivist values and socialist framework. Drawing on the work of Wenger (1998, 1999), Erikson (1994), Dewey (1986), Markus and Kitayama (1998), and Phan (2010), the study situates *bản sắc* across temporal, social, and spatial domains. It also incorporates the concepts of multi-membership (Wenger, 1999) and the “New Mestiza” – “multiplicitous self” (Ortega, 2001, 2016), illustrating how teachers continuously negotiate identity in the work environment and in Vietnamese society over time.

The study engaged fourteen teachers from international and public schools for one-to-one semi-structured interviews, followed by a focus group discussion with five participants from both groups. In addition, observations at public school and international schools took place. All data was analysed thematically with cross-checking for themes redefining.

As a result of engagement with existing literature and with research participants, this study proposes a conceptual framework of teacher's *bản sắc*. Teacher's *bản sắc* is multilayered, constituted of Vietnamese national identity, *bản sắc tập thể* (BSTT), *bản sắc cá nhân* (BSCN), and *bản*. Notably, societal expectations for teachers are conceptualised as the typical *bản*, creating a mould that influences how teachers conduct and perceive themselves in daily life. For public school teachers, their *bản sắc* is shaped by national identity, social hierarchy, social harmony, traditional morality, and the societal role of teachers. They navigate tensions between personal beliefs and societal expectations, though some Western influences, such as student-centred practices, are also evident. In contrast, international school teachers experience a different blend of influences. Their *bản sắc* is shaped by Western influences, such as non-hierarchical classroom dynamics, individualism, and English-language dominance, alongside Vietnamese language use and traditions. Their position is

marked by higher incomes, emphasis on BSCN, and distinct social groupings, yet they often perceive lower societal standing compared to public school teachers. This group of teachers negotiate a hybrid bản sắc between the Vietnamese traditions and Western influences.

A key contribution of this study is the emergence a hybridity spectrum of bản sắc, with multiplicitous self and multi-membership. Teachers' bản sắc reflect broader dynamics within Vietnam's the education landscape where tension arises between neoliberal capitalist principles and Vietnam's socialism. The findings demonstrate that teachers do not passively assimilate into Western influences or neoliberal capitalist framework but instead actively uphold, reinterpret, and reshape the Vietnamese collectivist and socialist values in response to these influences.

By offering a culturally grounded framework, this research established a nuanced understanding of Vietnamese teacher identity and challenge the dominant ways in which identity is understood (i.e., personal agency, autonomy). It also offers insights relevant for future policy and practice in similar postcolonial contexts.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and context of the study

The century-long struggle against colonisation such as France (1858 – 1954) and America (1954 – 1975) positions Vietnam as a postcolonial site, and the enduring impacts of colonialism continue to shape political, economic, cultural, and education systems long after the end of colonial rule. Since 1986, the country has undertaken significant educational reforms as part of its efforts to rebuild the nation and reclaim the national identity (Trinh, 2018). Recently, the Vietnamese government has issued reform policies that emphasise international integration by aligning the national education standards with international standards (Vietnamese Government, 2018; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013). The reform echoes global policy convergence as countries adopt similar strategies that are internationally promoted as best practices by the global agendas (Nordtveit, 2010; Ball, 2012; Spring, 2008). This may risk marginalising the local epistemologies and traditional understandings of education and ultimately shape teachers' experiences as a whole. These policies also encourage foreign investment in education, especially the establishment of foreign-invested schools – often known as international schools – operating in the non-public sector (see [Chapter 2](#)).

Since the inception of the reform, Vietnam has witnessed a rapid growth of international schools. Between 2020 and 2025, the number of international schools rose by 24%, with student enrolment increasing by 28% and total revenue rising by 48% (ISC Research, 2025a). Former studies have pointed out that international schools globally have traditionally catered to the wealthiest 5% of non-English-speaking populations, typically using English as the medium of instruction and operating independently of national systems (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). Increasingly, such schools are admitting host country nationals (Hayden, 2011). In Vietnam, this trend has been formalised through Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, which raised the allowable proportion of Vietnamese students in international schools from 10% to 50%. For many local families, international schooling is perceived as a vehicle for their children to acquire a competitive edge in a globalised economy (ISC Research, 2023; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2017). Despite their appeal, international schools have been critiqued for their postcoloniality or even neocoloniality as they reinforce the power hegemony of the West by perpetuating cultural hierarchies, marginalising the indigenous/ local epistemologies, and exacerbating socio-economic disparities (Hammer, 2021; Tanu, 2018; Emenike and Plowright, 2017; Cruz et al., 2023; Song, 2013). Moreover, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP has been criticised for accelerating the marketisation of education, raising concerns about the preservation of Vietnamese national identity in the face of increasing neoliberal capitalist influences (Kim and Mobrand, 2019).

Within this shifting landscape, teacher identity has emerged as a key area of research, particularly regarding international schools (e.g., Bailey and Cooker, 2019; Bright, 2022; Poole, 2019, 2020). However, little has been researched about the experiences of local Vietnamese teachers at international schools. Moreover, there is a limited understanding of how the expansion of international schooling interacts with the national education landscape and how these dynamic influences teachers' identities in Vietnamese society. Moreover, in Vietnam, teachers' working conditions in public schools and international schools are vastly different, including qualification requirements, standards for teachers, and teachers' pay and responsibilities (see [Chapter 2](#)). These differences may shape teachers' understandings of who they are in distinct ways.

To explore these dynamics, this study examines teachers' *bản sắc* – a culturally grounded and context-specific concept of identity – through the theoretical lenses of postcolonial theory and socio-constructivist theories on identities. It investigates how teachers in both public and international schools perceive who they are in the context of educational reform.

1.2 *Bản sắc* as a research concept

Although a body of research approaches identity from the sociocultural perspective (e.g., Martin, 2019; Taylor, 2017; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009), the concept of identity in English language discourses is often rooted in Western epistemologies with emphasis on the individualism and “I” consciousness. Within such framing, identity is closely associated with individual agency and autonomy in liberal sense, which expressed through one's actions, engagements, and participation in social contexts.

This research positions identity in Vietnamese collectivist and socialist society in postcolonial context. To avoid imposing theoretical frameworks not rooted in Vietnamese epistemologies to the local context, it requires shifting the focus of studying identity into the local cultural framework. In this light, *bản sắc* serves as a research concept that engages with local way of being, knowing, and living.

In Vietnamese society, being a teacher is not merely a profession but also a societal role (Dung and Pereira, 2022) embedding their identity in the social fabrics. This is because Vietnam has been characterised as collectivist society (Thai and Ashwill, 2005; Van Bich, 1999; Borton, 2000; Tran, 2009; Truong et al., 2017) where values are evident in Vietnamese hierarchical language, Confucian influences, as well as the geographical and historical impacts. In postcolonial context, the country has established itself as a socialist state of which principles emphasise self-sacrifice, patriotism, and collective responsibility (Nhưng and Nghia, 2024). Together, collectivism and socialism have shaped a self-conception that is primarily relational, group-oriented, societal embedded (Phan, 2010). These values form a foundation for conceptualising teacher's *bản sắc* and will be further elaborated in [Chapter 3](#).

As a postcolonial site, Vietnamese ways of understanding identity (bản sắc) have often been marginalised by colonial discourse. In the context of education reform, policy push for international standards alongside with increasing growth of international schools may further complicate how Vietnamese identity is understood. In this regard, bản sắc as a research concept signifies fluidity and continuous negotiation between the local and global forces. These notions are further explored in [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 5](#).

The Vietnamese concept of bản sắc, therefore, offers a culturally grounded to explore identity, shifting away from Western-centric approach in identity research. Linguistically, bản refers to “self,” and sắc means “colour(s),” suggesting identity as “the colour(s) of the self”. While bản is the root, the basis, the core, the nucleus of a thing or a person, sắc refers to what’s seen on the outside (Minh Chi, 2007). Thus, bản sắc captures both normative and performative aspects that are inseparable. In this thesis, bản sắc of teachers is conceptualised as *a dynamic ongoing process and a socially constructed phenomenon of who they are as shaped and reshaped by the social interactions within the social contexts when navigating the role of a teacher in Vietnamese society*. This conceptualisation of teachers’ bản sắc is further detailed in [Chapter 6](#).

1.3 Research questions

Within the evolving education landscape driven by education reform, this study aims to explore how teachers in the public and international schooling sectors perceive who they are and how the education reform has shaped their bản sắc. To achieve this aim, the thesis employs qualitative methods to conduct a comparative study of teachers in international and public schools, focusing on the following research questions:

- How do public school and international school teachers perceive their bản sắc in the work environment and Vietnamese society?
- How has Vietnam’s education reform shaped teachers’ bản sắc?

1.4 Why study bản sắc

The rationales for studying bản sắc are informed by two key research gaps: (1) the dominance of individualistic frameworks in teacher identity research; (2) the lack of empirical research employing culturally grounded concepts such as bản sắc to study identities of local Vietnamese teachers, especially international school teachers.

While there is an increasing body of scholarships calling for decolonial stance in research (e.g., Santos, 2015; Mignolo, 2011; Walsh, 2007), much of literature in teachers’ identity emphasises personal agency and autonomy deeply rooted in an individualistic framework (e.g., Beijaard et al., 2004; Edwards, 2015; Chávez et al., 2022). Such a framework could risk epistemological

misalignment when applied to Vietnamese society. Vietnamese society has been characterised as collectivist even amid globalisation (Ashwill and Thai, 2005; Van Bich, 2013; Borton, 2000; Tran, 2009; Truong et al., 2017), where self-conception is embedded in social groups such as family, schools, and communities (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Phan, 2010). Collectivist values like harmony, cooperation, and conformity often differ from the individualistic emphasis on independence and individual achievement (Chen et al., 1997; Triandis et al., 1990; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). This epistemological misalignment highlights a significant research gap, prompting the need for more culturally sensitive frameworks of identities.

Moreover, despite a growing body of research examining teachers' identity at international schools (e.g., Bailey and Cooker, 2019; Bright, 2022; Poole, 2019, 2020; Tarc and Tarc, 2017), the nuanced experiences of local teachers have remained overlooked (see [Chapter 5](#)). Existing research reveals that local teachers are frequently marginalised within international schools, including unequal pay, and professional status between expatriate and local staff, internalised hierarchies, and marginalisation of local epistemologies (Tanu, 2018; Gibson and Bailey, 2023; Lai et al., 2016; Hammer, 2021). Nonetheless, few studies have deeply examined bản sắc of local teachers within these internationalised educational spaces and in comparison with public school teachers.

Besides these research gaps, this study also originated from my personal experiences and reflections as a Vietnamese teacher navigating both public and international schooling systems. Growing up in Vietnam, I attended public schools from primary through upper-secondary education. Within this setting, I was ingrained with the values of a socialist and collectivist society. The school environment actively promoted Vietnamese national identity through Communist Party activities, the study of Ho Chi Minh's ideologies, and moral education. Teachers were positioned as authority figures, and a strict adherence to social hierarchy shaped classroom dynamics. These experiences led me to question the nature of student-teacher relationships, particularly the way respect was often conflated with fear and compliance.

After graduating from university, I chose to work in international schools, drawn by the belief that Western education models offered teachers greater freedom. However, my experiences in these settings created new tensions in how I viewed myself. While the non-hierarchical teacher-student relationship was initially liberating, it left me feeling a diminished sense of respect, a value I had once strongly associated with my former teachers at public schools. I also found myself constantly adapting my working style to align with Western norms to collaborate effectively with expatriate colleagues. Furthermore, English proficiency, which granted me access to better-paid positions in international schools, began to influence how I expressed myself and understood my bản sắc – even outside of work. As my linguistic choices shifted, so too did my internal sense of bản sắc.

The most striking tension I experienced was in my relationship with students' parents. I remember in a conversation with my academic manager, she said, *"Students' parents are very demanding, so try to be flexible to meet their needs"*. This sentiment unsettled me and made me

question the purpose of education itself. I found myself internally resisting, thinking, “I am a teacher, not a customer service agent.” This moment prompted critical reflection on the neoliberal capitalist principles underpinning international education, where parents are positioned as clients and education as a commodified service (Ball, 2012; Hayden and Thompson, 2008). The emphasis on consumer satisfaction over traditional educational values highlights the neoliberal capitalist influences, often at the expense of local epistemologies and teaching values (Tanu, 2018).

Additionally, working within international schools often isolated me from the wider public education system. My interactions remained largely confined to international school circles, which further detached me from the educational experiences and challenges of Vietnamese public school teachers. For example, when reading a news article about an incident at public schools, I could only draw from my past experiences as a student.

These experiences consistently made me question, “Who am I?” The identity I developed through public education stood in stark contrast to my experiences in the international school. The tensions I observed between personal, cultural, and professional aspects of *bản sắc* inspired this PhD research. By exploring the lived experiences of teachers in both settings, the thesis aims to understand how their *bản sắc* is constructed, challenged, and negotiated in the context of Vietnam’s education reform.

1.5 An overview of the theoretical framework and research methods

This comparative study is grounded in postcolonial theory and socio-constructivist theories of identity, which provide a critical lens to examine the concept of *bản sắc* (see [Chapter 6](#)). Postcolonial theory (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Said, 1995) underpins this study by challenging Western epistemic dominance, retaining Vietnamese language in data collection and analysis, advocating a decolonial stance that centres Vietnamese voices, ways of living and knowing. Engaging with postcolonial theory, the study challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies and aligns with the “ecology of knowledge” (Santos, 2015), advocating for epistemological pluralism and a dialogical dynamic between knowledge systems from the East and the West. In doing so, it critiques the legacy of colonial power and the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism in the education landscape. Complementing this, socio-constructivist perspectives on identity (Erikson, 1994; Dewey, 1986; Wenger, 1998, 1999), Asian/Latin-American theories of self (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Ortega, 2001, 2016), Vietnamese perspective of cultural identity (Phan, 2010) inform the conceptualisation of *bản sắc*. Here, identity is continuously negotiated across temporal (past, present, future), social (work environment), and spatial (wider Vietnamese society) domains, with concepts of multi-membership and the “multiplicitous self” highlighting teachers’ navigation of overlapping social groups and values.

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore how teachers perceive their bản sắc. To achieve a rich and comprehensive understanding, the research utilised three complementary methods: semi-structured one-to-one interviews, focus group discussion (FGD), and school observations. Each method contributed uniquely to the exploration of bản sắc. The semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth insights into individual teachers' lived experiences and their perception of their bản sắc. The FGD facilitated the co-construction of meaning among participants, highlighting collective conceptualisation of bản sắc, group dynamics, and negotiated viewpoints between teachers from different educational settings. Observations provided contextual data by capturing teacher behaviours and interactions in real time, in their classrooms and schools. The combination of these methods allowed for cross-checking and theme redefining, helped mitigate researcher bias, and enabled the researcher to explore bản sắc across the temporal, social, and spatial domains. This multi-method approach thus supported a more nuanced and robust analysis of teachers' bản sắc across two differing educational settings (Denscombe, 2017; Patton, 2014).

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised into a total of eleven chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the research background and context, the research questions, the rationales for studying bản sắc, the research questions, and an overview of the theoretical framework, and research methods.

Chapter 2 elaborates on education reform policies and structures of the Vietnamese education system, including teacher education, the structure of the public education sector, the working conditions of public school teachers, the organisation of international schools within the non-public sector, and the working conditions of international school teachers.

Chapter 3 contextualises Vietnam as a collectivist and socialist society, by comparing features of Collectivist and Individualist societies, discussing the self-construals, and bản sắc of Vietnamese people.

Chapter 4 discusses postcolonial theory and its relevance to the thesis. This chapter informs the decolonial approach of the thesis and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter 5 builds on postcolonial theories presented in Chapter 4 to discuss the politics of international schooling, including the definition of international schools, the growth of international schools, the neoliberal capitalist principles underpinning international schools, the assumption of social class (re)production, and teachers at international schools.

Chapter 6 describes and justifies the methodological approach, theoretical and conceptual framework of bản sắc, together with research methodology, data collection and data analysis. The researcher's positionality is incorporated throughout the chapter.

Chapter 7 focuses on how both groups of teachers perceive and define bản sắc, arguing for the emerging conceptualisation of bản sắc as informed by empirical insights. This chapter incorporates socio-constructivist theories on identity to support such conceptualisation.

Chapter 8 explicitly discusses bản sắc of public school teachers, drawing from the conceptualisation of bản sắc in Chapter 7. This chapter includes bản sắc in teachers' work environment and Vietnamese society.

Chapter 9 explicitly discusses bản sắc of international school teachers, drawing from the conceptualisation of bản sắc in Chapter 7 and incorporating postcolonial theory. This chapter examines bản sắc in the work environment and Vietnamese society, with particular attention to the interplay between local traditions and Western influences.

Chapter 10 synthesises the key findings from the previous three chapters, addressing the research questions. The significance of bản sắc as research concept is also reinforced in this chapter.

Chapter 11 outlines the research contributions to theoretical knowledge, empirical knowledge, and policy. It also discusses research limitations, provides recommendations for future research, and concludes with a self-reflection on the researcher's journey throughout the PhD study.

Chapter 2: An Overview of Vietnam's Education Reform Policies and the Education System

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the education reform policies contextualising this thesis (Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP), teachers' education, and the overview of Vietnam's education system which consists of the public and non-public sectors. Vietnam's education system employs a top-down hierarchical structures of administrative and education levels which apply to schools in both sectors, including international schools. Notably, although teacher education pathway is not divided into public and non-public sectors, the working conditions (i.e., requirements, responsibilities, salary) of public schools and international school teachers vastly differs.

The chapter is structured into three main sections. [Section 2.2](#) examines the education reform policies and their implications. [Section 2.3](#) provides an overview of the Vietnamese education system in terms of its administrative structure and education levels. [Section 2.4](#) presents the teacher education pathways for Vietnamese teachers. [Section 2.5](#) provides an overview of the public education sector and public school teachers' working conditions. [Section 2.6](#) discusses international schools as operating in the non-public sector and the working conditions of their teachers. The chapter concludes by identifying key takeaways and highlights the distinctions between the two groups of teachers.

2.2 Vietnam's education reform policies

Educational policy encompasses governmental initiatives designed to define and direct the trajectory of an educational system, establish priorities, and delineate objectives for both short- and long-term educational development (Okoroma, 2000 as cited in Berebon, 2020). In 'developing' countries, especially Asian countries, education reform has been crucial for national development strategies (Hallinger, 2010). This section examines the key education reform policies in Vietnam and their implications, contextualising the thesis.

Resolution 29-NQ/TW: Education Reform for International Integration

In 2013, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) issued Resolution 29-NQ/TW with extensive and detailed regulations on education reform, titled "*Fundamental and Comprehensive Innovation in Education, Serving Industrialisation and Modernisation in a Socialist-Oriented Market Economy during International Integration.*"

In Vietnamese context, international integration is defined as:

An inevitable process, with a long history of development and origins, the social nature of labour and the civilised development of relationships between people. In society, people who want to survive and develop must have close connections with each other. More broadly, on an international scale, a country that wants to develop must work with other countries.

(Ministry of Justice, 2025)

Up to now, for Vietnam, international integration has been implemented in three main areas including: Integration in the economic field (international economic integration), integration in the fields of politics, defence, security; and international integration in the fields of culture, society, education, science, technology and other fields. However, international economic integration is the focus of international integration; Integration in other fields must facilitate international economic integration (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

Resolution 29-NQ/TW emphasises the importance of education as fundamental for international integration. International integration in education is further defined as:

Modernising and internationalising the country's education system to improve the quality of education and training. Education and training in Vietnam today is a relatively pressing issue, requiring fundamental reform and finding new directions to improve the quality of education and training to international standards.

(The Ministry of Justice, 2025)

To achieve this, Resolution 29-NQ/TW outlines several strategic initiatives: Actively integrating into global education by learning from international educational models, scientific advancements, and technological achievements; enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation in education through international agreements; and increasing cultural and academic exchange programs to promote global engagement. At the same time, the resolution stresses the preservation of Vietnam's national identity, emphasising *"the country's independence, control, socialism, good customs, and culture"* (Section B, Article III, Clause 9). This dual commitment reflects the government's cautious approach to global integration.

A key principle of Resolution 29-NQ/TW is that *"Education is a national priority and the mission of the Party, Government, and the whole nation. Investment in education is an investment in development, prioritised in socio-economic development plans"* (Section B, Article I, Clause 1). The resolution explicitly outlines objectives such as producing a highly skilled workforce and meeting regional and international standards through collaboration with foreign institutions. It also promotes measures like attracting foreign investment in education, developing international partnerships, and increasing opportunities for Vietnamese students to study abroad. Ultimately, Resolution 29-NQ/TW positions Vietnam's education system to compete in the global landscape by training a highly skilled workforce, fostering international collaboration, and expanding foreign investment in education.

These approaches to international integration reflect the global education agendas on policies. In particular, the aim to align Vietnam's education system with international standards to enhance competitiveness in the global knowledge economy is consistent with the World Bank's Human Capital Project (2020a) and OECD's Human Capital at work frameworks (2024). These frameworks view education as a key mechanism to enhance human capital to drive economic prosperity, and to produce globally competitive citizens who can function in transnational labour markets. Moreover, the initiatives of the reform align with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). For example, the initiative of "increasing cultural and academic exchange programs to promote global engagement" aligns with SDG 4b, which focuses on enhancing scholarships and educational mobility (UNESCO, 2019).

Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP: Foreign Investment in Education

Following the principles outlined in Resolution 29-NQ/TW, the Vietnamese government introduced Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, titled "*On Foreign Cooperation and Investment in Education.*" A key provision of this decree is the establishment and expansion of foreign-invested schools, commonly referred to as international schools. Over the past decades, Vietnamese families – particularly in major urban centres – have shown increasing interest in international schooling (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2017). Responding to this growing demand, the decree stipulates that from 2019 onwards, schools funded wholly or partially by foreign investors may enrol up to 50% of Vietnamese students.

This policy has not only accelerated the growth of the international school sector – as reflected in rising enrolment numbers and increasing fee incomes (ISC Research, 2025a) – but also created a greater need to recruit local Vietnamese teachers to meet staffing demands. The decree also provides specific regulations regarding staff recruitment, school operation, and curricular guidelines, which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

Vietnam's education reform policies, particularly Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, represent a strategic international integration in education. These policies aim to balance the pursuit of international standards with national development goals. Resolution 29-NQ/TW provides the overarching vision, promoting global collaboration in education while simultaneously affirming the need to preserve Vietnamese national identity. In alignment with this vision, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP offers a concrete mechanism to facilitate foreign investment in education, thereby enabling the growth of international schools within the education landscape.

While these policies underscore Vietnam's commitment to building a globally competitive education system, potential implications for the national education landscape and the teaching workforce must be addressed. Firstly, the education reform echoes the neoliberal discourses which stress global policy convergence, where countries adopt similar strategies not because they are locally

developed or culturally appropriate, but because they are internationally promoted as best practices (Nordtveit, 2010; Ball, 2012; Spring, 2008). This convergence may risk marginalising local epistemologies and traditional understandings of education. Secondly, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP fosters the growth in foreign-invested schools (normally referred to as international schools) as a part of foreign investment legislation for economic development. Hallinger (2010) argues that education reforms in Asian countries have strong relationship with economic growth goals as these countries need to close the economic gaps with industrial countries. Given the economic-driven goal, the Decree has been criticised for promoting neoliberal capitalism by treating education as a market, potentially disrupting the identity of the local population despite the attempt to protect the national identity (Kim and Mobrand, 2019). This raises a question of the educational purposes at public schools and international schools. Thirdly, the reform reflects the growing influence of international organisations, such as the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO, in shaping the global agendas in education and global education policies. The pressure to align the national education with the international standards can marginalise voices of the local population, reinforcing hegemony power relations in knowledge production and policymaking. If the international standards mean Western-centric standards, what becomes of local knowledge, values, and educational philosophies when these standards dominate the education landscape? Ultimately, how do teachers perceive who they are in such a changing landscape? Notably, the education reform may have unintentionally contributed to a growing division between the public and international school sectors. This division has been particularly evident in the differing working conditions experienced by teachers, including recruitment requirements, salary scales, benefits, professional standards, and access to professional development opportunities.

2.3 The structure of Vietnamese education system

Vietnamese education system is highly centralised with top-down administrative structure. At the national level, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) serves as the primary authority responsible for the development and implementation of educational policies. Beneath it, the Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) operates at the provincial level, while the Bureaus of Education and Training (BOETs) functions at the district level.

The MOET is tasked with a comprehensive range of responsibilities. These include formulating national education policies, establishing educational plans and long-term strategies, and setting overarching goals, curricula, and content. The ministry also regulates Vietnamese language teaching and minority language education; sets standards for textbooks, teaching materials, and educational documents; and governs policies on examinations, student admissions, testing, certification, and degrees. Further responsibilities include defining teacher and education officer standards, overseeing student affairs, managing school infrastructure standards, planning educational

finances and investments, ensuring education quality and monitoring quality controls. The MOET also leads initiatives related to environmental education, science and technology integration, digital transformation in education, vocational education regulation, institutional management, school inspections, and international cooperation in education. In essence, the MOET directs the national education system, primarily focusing on strategic planning, standardisation, and regulatory oversight (Vietnamese Government, 2025a).

At the sub-national level, the Departments of Education (DOETs) are responsible for coordinating and implementing MOET's policies within provinces and major cities. These departments report both to MOET and to the People's Committees at the corresponding administrative level. The DOETs ensure that national directives are effectively adapted to local contexts and provide direct oversight to secondary schools. At the district or urban ward level, the BOETs manage local education administration and report to both the provincial DOETs and local People's Committees. BOETs are directly responsible for supervising primary schools within their jurisdiction (MOET, 2020e).

According to the framework of Vietnam's education system indicated in Government Decision 1981/Q-TTg, the structure of the system consists of the General Academic route and Vocational route, offering the flexibility for students to move between the alternative routes (see Figure 2.1). The hierarchical stages in the academic route are illustrated in Figure 1, including: (1) Nursery and kindergarten (pre-school); (2) General education including primary level, lower-secondary level, and upper-secondary level; and (3) University education/Higher education including undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Alternatively, the vocational route includes secondary and higher education (Prime Minister, 2016). These hierarchical stages apply to both public and non-public sectors.

In alignment with this structure, the Vietnamese Qualification Framework includes eight levels of qualification with six types of degrees, such as Primary certificates, Associate degrees, College degrees, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and Doctoral degrees. The eight qualification levels include Level 1 - Primary I; Level 2 - Primary II; Level 3 - Primary III; Level 4 - Intermediate;

Level 5- College; Level 6 - University; Level 7 - Master; Level 8 - Doctor (Prime Minister, 2016).

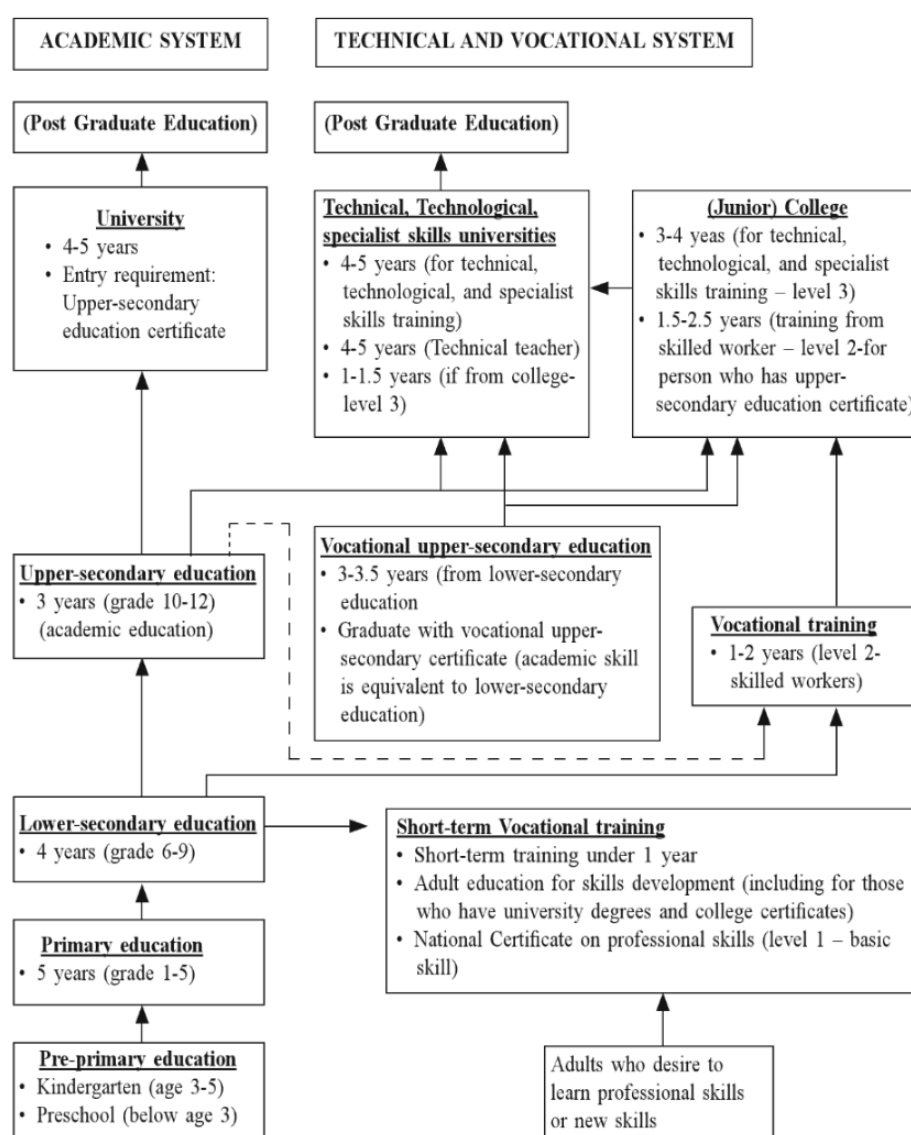


Figure 2.1: The hierarchical structure of Vietnam's education system (London, 2011, p.20)

2.4 Teacher education in Vietnam

Teacher education in Vietnam follows a tiered structure, offering multiple pathways for individuals to enter the teaching profession depending on the level of education they aim to teach. Teacher education for primary and secondary school teachers is offered through different institutional levels, primarily Colleges of Education (Cao đẳng Sư phạm), Teacher Education Universities (Đại học Sư phạm), and other universities offering teacher education programmes (Chuyên ngành Sư phạm). Notably, according to Resolution 29-NQ/TW, graduates from Colleges of Education are no longer eligible to teach at Primary and Secondary levels.

At University level, the teacher education programme for primary teaching admits high school graduates. Graduates from this programme will (1) have a sufficiently broad knowledge of General Education, (2) have solid professional knowledge ensuring subject teaching and educational activities in Primary Education programme, (3) be trained in Vietnamese, Social Science, or a specialised subject (i.e., Mathematics, Vietnamese, Music Pedagogy, Art Pedagogy, Physical Education, Special Education, Union of Vietnamese children, Minorities' language), (4) be equipped with foundation disciplines of Psychology, Pedagogical Study, Teaching Methods, Assessment at Primary school level, Administration Management, and Education Management. The duration of the program is 8 semesters with approximately 210 credits, including 50 credits of Basic General Education and 160 credits of Professional Education (Phuong et al., n.d). Graduates from this program obtain a Bachelor's degree in primary teaching.

Unlike Primary school teachers, Secondary school teachers are only in charge of 1 subject or 2-3 combined subjects. Therefore, universities offer programmes where teachers specialise in a particular subject. The duration is 3 academic years (6 semesters) with 169 credits, including 45 credits of Foundation Knowledge, 20 credits of Professional Knowledge. The time distributed for major subjects – such as Mathematics, English, and Literature – is 1.5-2 times higher than for minor subjects such as Physical Education, Art, and Music. School placement accounts for 9 credits in the training programme (Phuong et al., n.d). For student teachers of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and Foreign Languages, the education duration is 4 years (Ibid.). To create more flexibility in the career pathway, the University of Education under Vietnam National University (VNU-UE) offers a one-year pedagogical certification for graduates in STEM fields who wish to transition into teaching (education.vnu.edu.vn).

Among 133 teacher education programmes in Vietnam (MOET, 2019b), the major teacher education programmes (in top 100 national ranking universities in 2024) are offered by Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), University of Education – Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-UE), and Danang University of Education (DUE). These universities play a crucial role in shaping the quality of teacher education and ensuring alignment with national educational goals and international teaching standards, as stated in Resolution 29-NQ/TW. In Vietnam, teacher education programmes, especially those in top ranking universities, are highly competitive. For example, in 2024, Hanoi National University of Education set the admission cut-off score at 29.3 (of total maximum 30 for three exam subjects) for History and Vietnamese Literature subject major (Huyền Vi, 2024). This suggests that teaching in Vietnam is an attractive profession.

The next section discusses the public education sector in terms of its structure and regulations for public school teachers.

2.5 The public education sector

2.5.1 The structure

The public sector is in direct alignment with the structure of Vietnamese education system, which is highly centralised with top-down administrative structure and education levels (see [Section 2.3](#)). Notably, the public education sector is deeply embedded within the broader political structure of the state, particularly the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Party-affiliated organisations are present in schools across levels. These include the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, which recruits students from Upper-secondary education and higher levels, and the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation, which recruits students at the Primary and Lower-secondary levels. These groups play an important role in promoting political education, ideological alignment, and civic responsibilities among students (Hân and Anh, 2024). The goal of the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation is to work together with the school and relevant educational offices to educate children in both schools, in residential areas, during school hours and outside of class hours (Central Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation Council, 2020). The organisation's goal is to align educational ideals with socialist political orientation. The main activities organised by the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation include moral and lifestyle education activities; activities serving learning and culture; recreational activities and development; labour and creative activities; social activities; educational activities in the spirit of international solidarity and friendship (Ibid.). These activities are embedded in the curriculum.

Unlike schools in the non-public sector, public schools are funded by state budget. This thesis focuses on public schools for general education in the academic route, including Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary schools (see Figure 2.1). These schools are managed by the regional Bureaus of Education and Training (BOETs) and Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) (MOET, 2020c, 2020d). Public school teachers in this study are defined as those who work in the academic route in the Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary schools.

2.5.2 Public school teachers' working conditions

In Vietnamese proverbs and folktales, teachers are depicted as wise and virtuous figures who hold a crucial role in society. Traditional sayings such as “*Không thầy đố mày làm nên*” (one cannot succeed without a teacher) and “*Muốn con hay chữ thì yêu lấy thầy*” (love the teacher if you wish to obtain knowledge) emphasise the deep cultural reverence for teachers. Teachers are often described as “*người lái đò*” (the ferryman), guiding students across the river of knowledge without expecting material rewards but rather enduring respect and gratitude from their pupils. The establishment of Vietnamese Teachers' Day was aimed at elevating the status of teachers and reinforcing their public image. Since its official recognition in 1958 and subsequent renaming under Decision 167-HĐBT in 1982, Vietnamese Teachers' Day has played a significant role in inspiring new works of poetry and

literature that celebrate teachers, complementing the traditional proverbs and folktales that continue to be widely cherished (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2019). Alongside mothers and soldiers, teachers have been a common subject in Vietnamese poetry and music, often portrayed as surrogate parents who dedicate their lives to nurturing future generations (Mai and Hall, 2017). Over time, while teachers were once viewed as distant figures of authority whose expertise conferred lifelong influence, contemporary portrayals increasingly emphasise their role as mentors and parental figures who cultivate students' growth and development (Ibid.). This enduring cultural reverence highlights the societal roles of teachers in Vietnam. In addition, as civil servants, public school teachers are subjected to strict professional regulations, including clearly defined qualifications and responsibilities; sets of standards of professionalism, morality, and behaviours; workload; and salary.

Qualifications

Public school teachers at the Primary, Lower-secondary and Upper-secondary levels are classified into three tiers of civil servants: First-class, Second-class, and Third-class (MOET, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Each tier is associated with distinct academic and professional development requirements. For example, at the Upper-secondary education level, Third-class teachers are required to hold a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy along with a Certificate in Professional Development for Third-Class Upper-secondary School Teachers. Second-class teachers must have either a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy or a Bachelor's degree in a subject relevant to their teaching area, in addition to a Certificate in Professional Development for Second-class Upper-secondary school teachers. First-class teachers must possess at least a Master's degree, which may be in Pedagogy, in a specialised subject area, or Educational Leadership and Management. They must also complete a Certificate in Professional Development for First-class Upper-secondary school teachers (MOET, 2021a). The same tiered requirements also apply to teachers at the Lower-secondary level.

Responsibilities according to tiers

Depending on their tier, teachers are obligated to different responsibilities. Responsibilities for Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary school teachers are listed in Table 2.1-2.3.

Third-class	Second-class	First-class
- Developing teaching and student education plans.	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Third-class	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Second-class
- Participating in developing teaching and	Primary school teachers and the following:	Primary school teachers and the following:

student education plans of the professional team according to the goals and primary education program. - Implementing the primary school general education program and the school's educational plan. - Implementing teaching and educational methods in the direction of developing student qualities and abilities. - Participating in discovering and fostering gifted students. - Participating in applied pedagogical science research and building elementary school teaching aids and equipment. - Completing all training and professional development courses as prescribed; self-studying and practicing improving political, professional and professional qualifications. - Participating in professional activities as required. - Participate in universal education, compulsory education and illiteracy eradication, inclusive education.	- Being a reporter or demonstrating in primary school teacher training classes or teaching experiments of new models and methods at school level and above. - Presiding over training content and professional/topical activities in specialised groups and blocks. - Participating in evaluating and approving applied pedagogical scientific research topics of colleagues from school level and above. - Participating in examiner board for excellent teachers, excellent class teachers, and teachers in charge of the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Team from school level and above. - Carrying out the duties of core primary school teachers. - Participating in other professional activities such as educational quality accreditation, inspection, professional testing, and pedagogical skills from school level or higher. - Participating in guiding and evaluating student teachers' pedagogical practice (if any).	- Participating in editing, compiling, developing programs and training materials for teachers and elementary students or joining the Textbook Selection Council when selected. - Presiding over professional and thematic training and activities of the school or participate in evaluating and approving applied pedagogical scientific research topics of colleagues from district level or higher. - Participating in external assessment teams or participating in inspection and testing teams to examine the expertise and skills of primary school teachers from the district level or higher. - Participating in the examiner board for excellent teachers or excellent homeroom teachers or teachers in charge of the excellent Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Team at the district level or higher.
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- Coordinating with parents and social forces in student education and carrying out consulting work for primary school students.
 - Performing other tasks assigned by the principal.
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Table 2.1: Primary school teachers' responsibilities in Circular 02/2021/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2021c)

Third-class	Second-class	First-class
- Developing educational plans for assigned subjects and participating in developing educational plans of the professional team according to the goals and educational programs at the lower secondary level. - Teaching and educating students according to the educational programs and plans of the school and professional groups; Managing students in educational activities organised by the school. - Using teaching and educational methods in the direction of promoting students' abilities and qualities, and active students' activities. - Carrying out activities to check and evaluate	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Third-class Lower-Secondary school teachers and the following: - Being a reporter or demonstrating in teacher training classes or teach experiments on new models, methods, and technologies at school level and above. - Presiding over training content and thematic activities in professional groups or participating in developing electronic learning materials. - Participating in guiding or evaluating scientific and technological research products at school level or higher. - Participating in social activities and community service. - Promoting the participation of organisations and individuals in organising teaching and student	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Second-class Lower-secondary school teachers and the following: - Participating in compiling, evaluating, or selecting textbooks, local educational materials or other teaching materials and training materials for teachers. - Acting as a reporter, sharing experiences or demonstrating in training classes, fostering professional development for teachers at district level or higher or participate in online teaching. - Presiding over implementing and guiding colleagues to implement innovative policies and content of the industry. - Participating in professional and professional

students' learning and training results according to regulations.	education activities.	testing for teachers at the district level and higher.
Participate in discovering and fostering gifted students, tutoring weak students or guiding students in pedagogical practice (if any).	- Participating in an external assessment team or professional testing for teachers at the school level and above.	- Participating in evaluating or guiding scientific and technological research products at the district level or higher.
- Organising psychological counselling and career guidance activities for students and parents of assigned classes.	- Participating in the examiner board or instructor in competitions (for teachers or students) from school level or higher (if any).	- Participating in the organising committee or examiner board in competitions (for teachers or students) from district level or higher (if any).
- Coordinating with relevant organisations and individuals to carry out teaching, education, psychological counselling, and career guidance activities for students.		
- Participating in activities of professional groups, scientific research.		
- Completing the record system for managing educational activities according to regulations.		
- Carrying out the work of universalising lower secondary education and inclusive education within the assigned scope.		
- Participating in organising competitions (for teachers or students) from school level or higher (if		

any).

- Completing training courses and fostering programs as prescribed; self-study, self-training to improve professional capacity.

- Performing other tasks assigned by the principal.

Table 2.2: Lower-secondary school teachers' responsibilities in Circular 03/2021/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2021b)

Third-class	Second-class	First-class
- Developing assigned education plans and participating in the education plan of the department according to the objectives and study programmes of the Upper-secondary level. - Organising teaching and learning activities according to the school's and the department's education plan; managing students' education activities organised by the school. - Conducting exams, evaluating student's learning according to the indicated standards. - Organising mental-health consultation, career direction and career	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Third-class Upper-secondary school teachers and the following: - Acting as reporter or conducting demonstration for teaching training at school level; or carrying out experiment of new teaching models, methods, and technologies; leading professional development contents in the department or developing digital learning material. - Guiding or evaluating the products of scientific research at school level and above. - Evaluating professional expertise of teachers at school level and above. - Participating in excellent teachers' competition or	Fulfilling all the responsibilities of Second-class Upper-secondary school teachers and the following: - Composing or evaluating students' learning materials and teacher training materials - Writing reports, sharing experience or conducting demo class regarding teacher training at provincial level and above, or teaching on television. - Leading teacher training contents; guiding colleague teachers in establishing reform policies and reform contents; or leading professional workshops at the provincial level and above - Evaluating teachers' professional expertise at the

establishment to students and parents of the assigned classes.	homeroom teacher competition at school level and above.	provincial level and above.
- Recognising and developing gifted and outstanding students; offering tutorials to underachieving students; or guiding pedagogical internship and social activities for students.	- Creating exam questionnaires and marking exams at school level and above.	- Being a part of organising committee or judging panel or developing competition contents of teachers' competitions at provincial level and above
- Participating in the department's activities; participating in scientific research; completing education information management system; participating in assigned blended-learning activities; participating in competitions (for teachers or students) at school level and above.	- Guiding or examining students' scientific research competition at school level and above.	- Guiding or evaluating scientific research products of Upper-secondary school students' scientific research competitions at the provincial level and above.
- Completing training programmes; self-learning to improve professional expertise.	- Participating in social activities; attracting partners' participation in education activities.	- Composing contents or marking exams at Upper-secondary school excellent students' competition at provincial level and above.
- Fulfilling other responsibilities assigned by the principal		

Table 2.3: Upper-secondary school teachers' responsibilities in Circular 04/2021/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2021a)

As clearly outlined in Circular 15/2017/TT-BGDĐT, in addition to general teaching duties, homeroom teachers take on additional responsibilities. These include gaining a thorough understanding of their students to apply pedagogical methods suited to individual needs and the collective development of the class (MOET, 2017). Homeroom teachers are expected to collaborate

actively with students' families, subject teachers, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organisation, and other organisations involved in student development. They are also responsible for assessing and evaluating students at the end of each academic year, including ranking academic performance, proposing awards or disciplinary measures, recommending students for levelling up or for repeating exams, listing students in need of improving conduct, and completing students' academic record books (Ibid.). Moreover, homeroom teachers are required to participate in school-organised events and educational activities, and to submit regular or immediate reports to the school principal regarding the status and progress of their class (Ibid.).

Professional standards and standards for professional morality

Apart from responsibilities, the professional standards for public school teachers across levels are clearly stated in Circular 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2018a). There are five sets of standards, including:

Standard 1 – Teachers' dignity: Teachers must follow the regulations and exercise teachers' dignity; teachers must share their experience and support their fellow colleagues in exercising and establishing teaching dignity. There are two criteria to evaluate this standard which are teachers' morality and teachers' manners.

Standard 2 – Professional expertise development: Teachers must show solid expertise and proficient profession; teachers must regularly update and improve professional expertise to meet the requirements of education reform.

Standard 3 – Building an educational environment: Teachers must establish a safe and democratic educational environment, preventing and opposing school violence. The three criteria to assess this standard are: Teachers build the school's culture; teachers practice democratic rights in the school; teachers establish a safe and democratic educational environment, preventing and opposing school violence.

Standard 4 – Building relationships among schools, parents, and society: Teachers must organise and operate activities to develop the relationship among schools, parents, and society regarding morality and lifestyle teaching and learning for students.

Standard 5 – Using a second language or language of the minorities, applying information technology, optimising technological tools in teaching and learning: Teachers must be able to use a second language or language of the minorities, apply information technology, and optimise technological tools in teaching and learning.

Rooted in Confucianism, Vietnamese society places a strong emphasis on morality, particularly within the realm of education (Dam, 1999). Thus, public school teachers are expected to adhere to well-defined standards of professional morality. These moral standards vary across educational levels – Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary – and are also classified

according to the teacher's official tier. For example, as stated in Circular 04/2021/TT-BGDĐT, the standards for Third-Class and Second-Class Upper-secondary school teachers include compliance with the directives of the Communist Party and relevant circulars, adherence to national laws and local government regulations concerning upper-secondary education, and a commitment to continuous moral self-improvement (MOET, 2021a). Teachers are expected to exemplify a strong sense of responsibility, uphold the moral integrity and honour of the teaching profession, and maintain proper conduct in the presence of students. They must also demonstrate care and equality in treating all students, respect students' individuality, protect their rights and interests, and foster collegiality through collaboration with fellow teachers (Ibid.). In addition, adherence to established regulations regarding professional ethics, appropriate behaviour, and dress code is required. First-class teachers are expected to meet all the moral standards outlined for the lower tiers but are further obligated to serve as role models of professional ethics. They are also responsible for promoting moral conduct among their peers and encouraging adherence to ethical guidelines within the school community (Ibid.).

Behaviour standards

Social behaviour standards for teachers at all educational levels – regarding their interactions with students, school leaders, colleagues, students' parents, and school visitors – are outlined in Circular 06/2019/TT-BGDĐT. In relation to students, teachers are required to use appropriate and inclusive language, offer praise and feedback that is sensitive to individual contexts, and demonstrate moral integrity, empathy, responsibility, and care (MOET, 2019a). They are required to respect individual differences, promote equality, actively listen, provide advice and encouragement, and foster a safe learning environment free from school violence. Teachers must refrain from actions that could offend, exploit, or harm students and must not exhibit prejudice, engage in violence, or tolerate abusive behaviour. They are also prohibited from neglecting, ignoring, or concealing students' misbehaviour (Ibid.).

In their interactions with school leaders, teachers are required to communicate respectfully and appropriately, express honesty, constructive feedback, and cooperation, and comply with managerial guidance and regulations. However, they must also maintain their personal integrity and are discouraged from any conduct that disrespects or disrupts school unity. Similarly, teachers must not ignore or conceal misconduct by school leaders (MOET, 2019a).

In relation to colleagues and staff, teachers are required to communicate respectfully, act with honesty and goodwill, support professional development, and foster an environment of mutual respect. They must acknowledge differences, uphold others' dignity, and refrain from offensive or divisive behaviour. When interacting with students' parents, teachers are required to maintain respectful and professional communication, collaborate constructively, and demonstrate honesty and

integrity. They must avoid behaviour that could be perceived as disrespectful, coercive, or exploitative. In dealing with school guests, teachers must use appropriate language and demonstrate courteous, respectful behaviour, avoiding any actions that may cause offence or disruption (MOET, 2019a).

These behavioural standards have been revised and aligned with the broader goals of Resolution 29/NQ-TW, reflecting Vietnam's ongoing efforts to reform education in line with international standards while preserving cultural values.

Workload

According to Circular 15/2017/TT-BGDĐT, Primary school teachers annual working duration is 42 weeks including 35 weeks for teaching and educational activities according to the timetable of the academic year, 5 weeks for professional development, one week for new academic year preparation, and one week for final school year summary at the end of an academic year (MOET, 2017). For Lower-secondary and Upper-secondary school teachers, the annual working duration is 42 weeks including 28 weeks for teaching and educational activities according to the timetable of the academic year; 12 weeks for professional development, material development, scientific research, and other activities according to the timetable of the academic year; one week for new academic year preparation, and one week for final school year summary at the end of an academic year (Ibid.). Teachers' holidays include 2 months of summer holiday with full salary and allowance (if applicable), Tet holidays according to the regulation of MOET, and other public holidays according to the Vietnam Labour Laws. Depending on the academic year's timetable of the school, the principal would distribute teachers' holidays in accordance with the regulations (Ibid.).

In terms of teaching periods, primary school teachers are obligated to teach 23 lessons a week. This number is 19 for Lower-secondary school teachers, and 17 for Upper-secondary school teachers. Principals and vice-principals also have teaching responsibilities. The number of teaching lessons for the principals is calculated as two lessons per week multiplied by the number of weeks spent on educational activities according to the regulations for the academic year's planning (MOET, 2017). The number of teaching lessons for the vice-principals is calculated as 4 lessons per week multiplied by the number of weeks spent on educational activities according to the regulations for the academic year's planning. In addition to the standard teaching periods and working hours, teachers are eligible to have teaching hours reduced depending on multiple conditions, such as homeroom responsibilities, management responsibilities, Communist Party-related activities, and being female teachers with young children (MOET, 2017).

Payment and salary scheme

The salaries of public school teachers are indicated by the Circulars for payments of civil servants. Salaries of Vietnamese public Primary school, Lower-secondary school, and Upper-secondary school teachers in each tier are indicated in Circulars 01, 02, 03, and 04/2021/TT-BGDĐT. The Circulars demonstrate no difference in the salary among Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary school teachers. Meanwhile, there is a difference in the salary among each tier. Third-class teachers are subjected to the Co-Efficient salary level of an A1 civil servant, which is between 2.34 to 4.98. Second-class teachers are subjected to the Co-Efficient salary level of A2 official - A2.2 group, which is between 4.0 to 6.38. First-class teachers are subjected to the Co-Efficient salary level of A2 official - A2.1 group, which is between 4.40 to 6.78 (see Table 2.4).

First-class									
Co-Efficient salary level	4.4	4.74	5.08	5.42	5.76	6.1	6.44	6.78	
Pay rate	6 556 000	7 062 600	7 569 200	8 075 800	8 582 400	9 089 000	9 595 600	10 102 200	
Second-class									
Co-Efficient salary level	4	4.34	4.68	5.02	5.36	5.7	6.04	6.38	
Pay rate	5 960 000	6 466 600	6 973 200	7 479 800	7 986 400	8 493 000	8 999 600	9 506 200	
Third-class									
Co-Efficient salary level	2.34	2.67	3	3.33	3.6	3.99	4.32	4.65	4.98
Pay rate	486 600	3 978 300	4 470 000	4 961 700	5 453 400	5 945 100	6 436 800	6 928 500	7 420 200

Table 2.4: Salary schemes for teachers per tier in VND¹ - monthly salary in Circular 02, 03, 04/2021/TT-BGDD (MOET, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c)

When compared internationally, Vietnamese teachers' salaries are modest. The pay scale for public school teachers on the first tier is approximately 10 million VND a month, excluding allowances, equal to approximately \$5,000 annually. This amount is considerably low compared to other ASEAN countries, with the average teacher's salary in the region being around \$ 27,742 annually (Senate of the Philippines, 2019).

Compared to the international schooling sector, the structure of the public schooling systems and regulations for public school teachers are significantly more detailed. The following section focuses on the organisation of international schools and the working conditions of international school teachers.

2.6 International schools

This section of the chapter provides an overview of international schools in the non-public sector. It presents the definitions as well as the growth of international schools before exploring the organisation of international schools and the working conditions of international school teachers.

2.6.1 International schools in Vietnam within the non-public sector

In Vietnam, the term “international school” is not officially recognised in policies. Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP refers to those schools as “foreign-invested schools” without providing clear definitions for them. Instead, the decree classifies foreign-invested schools into five categories, including (1) Short-term training schools, (2) Kindergarten schools, (3) General education schools (including Primary schools, Lower-secondary schools, Upper-secondary schools, and multi-level schools), (4) Higher education institutes, and (5) University branch of higher education with foreign investment. Type 3 – general education – is usually referred to as “international schools” (Vietnamese Government, 2018). This type is the focus of the thesis.

“Foreign-invested schools” providing general education are usually known as international schools by Vietnamese citizens as those schools usually include the term “international” in their brand names. Thus, the terms “international schools” and “foreign-invested schools” are used interchangeably in this section. International schools are known as educational institutions that adopt a global pedagogical approach, often operating as private institutions funded by foreign investors, and typically use English as the medium of instruction and employ foreign teachers (Bright, 2015). As described by Bui (2014), international schools in Vietnam fall into two main categories: those that

¹ Currency unit: 1 USD is approximately 25,300 VND (Sacombank.com.vn, exchange rate on 28th February 2025)

implement the whole curriculum of a foreign country and those that use an integrated programme (with the combination of foreign curriculum and Vietnamese National Curriculum), also known as bilingual international schools. Kim and Mobrand (2019) suggest that bilingual international schools dominate the landscape in Vietnam.

Notably, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP does not classify foreign-invested schools as private schools. In the Vietnamese education system, foreign-invested schools are different from private schools (trường tư thục) although both types of schools operate in the non-public sector and are usually not supported by state budget. Many private schools have the term “international” in their names without having foreign investment (Communist Party Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2019).

Commonly, in the non-public sector, there are two types of schools: People-founded schools (trường dân lập), and Private schools (trường tư thục). According to Dang (2020), People-founded schools (trường dân lập) are owned and operated by non-governmental entities or private groups, including trade unions, cooperatives, youth organisations, and women’s associations. The operational expenses of these schools come from tuition fees (Ibid.). Private schools (trường tư thục) are private in their true sense as they are established by Vietnamese national individuals or organisations with permission from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2021d). While private schools utilise the National Curriculum with additional extra curricula and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, foreign-invested schools utilise international curricula such as IB (International Baccalaureate) or GCSE (The General Certificate of Secondary Education) with English-medium instruction. While private schools charge a higher amount of tuition fee than public schools, the tuition fees at foreign-invested schools are higher than private schools. Given the differences between private schools (trường tư thục) and foreign-invested schools (international schools), this thesis does not contextualise international schools as private schools but rather examines international schools within the non-public sector.

Competition and market-driven strategies are main features of schools in the non-public sector. According to Nguyen (2020), non-public schools may compete freely regarding service quality, tuition fees, teaching standards, and teacher recruitment; however, they must adhere to the content, curricula, and other criteria established by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). One of the benefits of the rise of non-public schools is diverse choices for learning environments that parents perceive suitable and beneficial for their children (Nguyen, 2020). Notably, parents in non-public schools believe that schools and teachers are obligated to provide an educational service commensurate with the amount of the tuition fees (Ibid.). Furthermore, the growth of the non-public sector is closely linked to geographical and socio-economic factors, with most non-public schools located in urban and suburban areas (Khoa, 2022). Driven by increasing demand and rising household incomes in these areas, these schools have rapidly expanded (Ibid.).

2.6.2 The growth international schools within the non-public sector

In recent years, non-public education sector in Vietnam has expanded rapidly. In the 2023-2024 academic year, there were 3,928 non-public schools (9.5% of the national total) and 1.2 million students (5% of the national student population of approximately 23 million) (Thống Nhất, 2023). Meanwhile, in 2017-2018, there were only 735 non-public schools (2.6% of the national total), serving 340,000 students (2.2%) and employing 25,400 teachers (3%) (Nguyen, 2020).

Since the implementation of Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, Vietnam has witnessed significant growth of international schools. Between 2020 and 2025, the number of international schools surged by 24%, with student enrolment increasing by 28% and total revenue rising by 48% (ISC Research, 2025a). In 2018, there were 66,022 students enrolled in international schools (BMI GlobalEd, 2019). From 2018-2023, the number of international and bilingual schools has grown by 4% in Hanoi, 2% in Ho Chi Minh City, and 6% in Binh Duong (The Savills Blog, 2023). This growth reflects not only increasing demand among affluent parents but also a broader shift in the perception and values of international education in Vietnam (Global Service in Education, 2025).

As of 2024, Vietnam has over 120 international schools, spanning from kindergarten to Upper-secondary (Hung, 2024). Most international schools are located in urban areas (Ibid.), with 50 international schools situated in Ho Chi Minh city (BMI GlobalEd, 2019). This urban phenomenon signifies a regional education disparity. As noted by Kong et al. (2020), the urban nature of international schools facilitates and reinforces patterns of urban segregation, creating distinct spatial and psycho-social boundaries. According to a report from The-Shiv (2025), rural and remote regions in Vietnam, particularly in the northern highlands and Mekong Delta regions, have faced significant challenges in terms of resources, infrastructure, and teacher quality. This urban concentration of international schools raises questions about educational equity in terms of access for students in non-urban areas. Moreover, if it is the case that local rich families mainly locate in urban areas and international schools cater to the growing demands of this groups, this could create a “gold rush” scenario as described by Machin (2017).

2.6.3 International school organisation

Rights and obligations

As mentioned in subsection 2.6.1, there are five categories of foreign-invested schools ranging from kindergarten to higher education. This thesis looks at foreign-invested schools offering general education (from Primary to Upper-secondary levels). The establishment of these schools requires official approval from different authorities, including the Prime Minister, by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and the jurisdiction of the President of the Provincial People’s Committee (Vietnamese Government, 2018).

Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP also outlines the rights and obligations of foreign-invested schools in Vietnam, ensuring their operations align with national laws and international agreements to which Vietnam is a signatory. These schools are granted legal protection and benefits under Vietnamese law while being subject to both the local provincial administration of the local People Committee and national oversight. They must publicly disclose their educational quality commitments and financial matters and are responsible for refunding tuition fees if the promised quality is not met. Additionally, they are required to safeguard the legal rights and benefits of students, staff, teachers, and other employees in cases of premature contract termination. International schools must also provide opportunities for political and socio-political organisations (i.e., Ho Chi Minh Youth Union, Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation) to operate within the institution, as permitted by Vietnamese law. Furthermore, by November 30 every year, these schools must submit an annual report to the State Management Agency detailing the implementation of the permitted educational activities, operation system, teaching staff, admission numbers, the operation of teaching and learning activities, students' learning outcomes, number of graduates, graduation ratio, awarded certifications, financial report, challenges and advantages of the implementation process as well as suggestions and recommendations. Reports must be submitted in both online and hard-copy formats. International schools are also subject to additional rights and obligations as stipulated by Vietnamese law (Vietnamese Government, 2018).

Infrastructure and class size

As stated in Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, an international school must be built in a single location with a conducive learning environment. The school's construction area is determined based on the number of classes, students, and regional characteristics, with a minimum requirement of six square meters per student in urban areas and ten square meters per student in rural areas. The learning and teaching spaces must ensure at least 2.5 square meters per student. Additionally, the school must include appropriate offices for administration, teachers' rooms, and meeting spaces. For Lower-secondary and Upper-secondary levels, subject-specific classrooms must be provided, along with libraries, tables, chairs, and teaching equipment that meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Furthermore, the school must be equipped with a multipurpose gym, an art education room, an information technology room, and facilities to support students with disabilities, as well as a school medical clinic. If day-boarding services are offered, a cafeteria and lunchroom must also be available. Adequate clean water and toilet facilities must be provided, adhering to MOET standards. Outdoor spaces are equally important, with a designated playground, exercise areas, and parking space occupying at least 30% of the total school area. To ensure security and proper identification, the school must have a surrounding wall, a clearly marked school gate, and a sign displaying the school's name (Vietnamese Government, 2018).

At international schools, the teacher-student ratio must be 1.5 teacher/class for Primary level, 1.95 teacher/class for Lower-secondary level, and 2.25 teachers/class for Upper-secondary level. The overall teacher-student ratio must be 25:1. In addition, the number of students per class must not exceed 30 students for Primary level, 35 students for Lower and Upper-secondary levels (Ibid.). Notably, these requirements are not mandatory for all schools in the public sector.

Curricula and student enrolment

International schools are permitted to implement the Vietnamese national curriculum and international curricula for Primary and Secondary levels (Vietnamese Government, 2018). Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP do not, however, define which international curriculum must be used, leaving this decision up to the individual schools. However, the curricula of international schools in Vietnam must align with the country's educational goals while ensuring that its content does not compromise national defend, security, or community interests. It must not include religious education, distort historical facts, or negatively impact Vietnamese culture, morality, and traditional customs. Additionally, the curricula must maintain continuity across different learning and training levels (Section 4, Article 37, Clause 1).

In terms of Vietnamese student admission, international schools are permitted to enrol Vietnamese students. However, the total number of Vietnamese students must not exceed 50% of the total number of students in the schools. Moreover, it is mandatory for Vietnamese students to be taught compulsory content determined by MOET. These regulations ensure that international education in Vietnam upholds national values while offering globally recognised learning opportunities (Vietnamese Government, 2018).

Tuition fees

Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP does not regulate tuition fees in international schools, allowing these institutions to determine their own pricing structures. In Vietnam, it is widely acknowledged that international schools charge substantially higher tuition fees compared to public schools. According to Thanh Hằng (2024), annual tuition fees at international schools range from 200 to 820 million VND (approximately \$7,700 – \$32,000). In addition to tuition, these schools impose additional charges for facilities, transportation, meals, books, and uniforms, amounting to an extra 20 to 40 million VND (\$790 – \$1,500) (Ibid.). Global Service in Education (GSE) (2025), tuition fees at international schools range from 500 to 900 million VND (approximately \$19,700 – \$35,500) annually (GSE, 2025). These numbers stand in stark contrast to the tuition fees in public schools, which range only between 900,000 and 2.7 million VND (\$35 – \$106) per year (Thanh Hằng, 2024). Table 2.5 demonstrates examples of tuition fees in selected international schools in Ho Chi Minh City.

	International school	Amount (million VND²/ year)
1	Sydney international school	140 – 190
2	West Australian international school	138 – 480
3	PennSchool	104 – 399
4	Nam Saigon	666 – 837
5	Vietnam-Australia international school	175 – 371
6	Saigon Pearl international school	243 – 572
7	Australian international school	257 – 606
8	The American School	507 – 689
9	Canadian international school	531 – 824
10	Nam Mỹ (UTS)	166 – 304

Table 2.5: Examples of international schools' tuition fee (Source: pennschool.edu.vn)

2.5.4 International school teachers' working conditions

Expatriate teachers

Regulations from the Circulars applied to public school teachers are not applicable to Vietnamese teachers and expatriate teachers at international schools. Although requirements for expatriate teachers regarding responsibilities, workload, salary, and social behaviours are indicated in policy documents, they remain general. According to Decree 152/2020/NĐ-CP, to be eligible to teach in Vietnam, expatriate teachers must be at least 18 years old, possess full civil act capacity, and have professional expertise, technical skills, or relevant work experience. They must also be in good health according to the standards set by the Ministry of Health, have no criminal record or ongoing criminal investigations in either Vietnam or their country of citizenship, and hold a valid work permit issued by Vietnamese authorities (Vietnamese Government, 2020b).

In addition to these general requirements, expatriate teachers must fulfil specific criteria based on their employment circumstances. A work permit is typically required unless the individual is sent

² Currency unit: 1 USD is approximately 25,300 VND (Sacombank.com.vn, exchange rate on 28th February 2025)

to Vietnam by an overseas university or research institute to teach or conduct research at an international school. Similarly, expatriate teachers directly employed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to work at educational institutions in Vietnam are exempt from this requirement. Furthermore, expatriate teachers must provide documented proof of their professional expertise and experience, such as diplomas in pedagogy, teaching certificates, or letters of employment verification. They are also required to obtain a health certificate to confirm their medical fitness. Importantly, international schools must have official permission from Vietnamese authorities (i.e., Prime Minister, MOET, the jurisdiction of the President of the Provincial People's Committee) to employ expatriate teachers (Vietnamese Government, 2020b).

Vietnamese teachers

While expatriate teachers have to meet certain requirements in order to teach in Vietnam and public school teachers are obligated to sets of responsibilities and standards, the working conditions of Vietnamese teachers in international schools are not explicitly detailed in policy documents. Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP only states that international school teachers must at least obtain a bachelor's degree in Pedagogy or equivalent (Vietnamese Government, 2018). This suggests that the requirements for Vietnamese teachers at international schools may be determined by the schools themselves. These requirements can vary among different international schools. Table 2.6 illustrates three examples of a teaching job post from three international schools with different requirements.

	Vietnam Finland International School (VFIS) (IB English Teacher)	ABC International School	British International School (BIS) (Secondary Arts Teacher)
Essential	Bachelor's degree or above in English Language Education or relevant fields. IB educator certificate (level B). Teaching credentials may be required. (Vfis.tdtu.edu.vn)	A good degree + PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) or equivalent teaching qualification in a relevant field Excellent spoken and written English. A minimum of three years teaching experience in a relevant subject Knowledge of relevant	Degree plus teaching qualification A minimum of three years recent experience of classroom teaching Good working knowledge of the English National Curriculum Outstanding classroom practise Understanding of

		technology Self-motivated High energy level Attention to details. - Good organisational and planning skills - Flexibility, Adaptability, Initiative (Theabcis.com)	effective teaching and learning theory and practice of individual development, differentiation and learning strategies Experience in teaching/ Knowledge of IGCSE and IBDP and/or A Level Knowledge of needs of students with EAL in the mainstream Able to work as a part of a team High level of IT competence (Nordangliaeducation.jobs)
Desirable	3 years minimum of experience in IB English level B. Teaching in an international environment is preferred. Proving working in Southeast Asia environments is preferred. Experience with (or motivation to learn) the Finnish curriculum is preferred. (Vfis.tdtu.edu.vn)	Problem solving Decision making Critical thinking. A Postgraduate Degree in a relevant discipline A proven ability to present to both pupil and adult audiences. Experience working in an international setting. (Theabcis.com)	International Experience Use of SIMS/ ISAMS (Nordangliaeducation.jobs)

Table 2.6: Examples of job posts for Vietnamese teachers in international schools

In Vietnam, most teachers working in international schools are not classified as civil servants and, therefore, do not fall under the national salary schemes. This suggests that their employment terms, salary scales, and payment structures may be determined by the schools themselves, with wages paid directly by their employers. As international schools usually locate in non-public sector which are not supported by state budget (Vietnamese Government, 2018), international school teachers are often paid directly by their employers.

The exact salaries of teachers in international schools are rarely disclosed in job descriptions, making it a somewhat unspoken topic. However, it is widely perceived that international school teachers earn significantly higher salaries compared to their counterparts in public schools. In 2019, it was reported that experienced teachers at international schools earned approximately 50 million VND (equivalent to \$2,200) per month (Quỳnh and Lê, 2019). Expatriate teachers with leadership and management experience could earn salaries starting at 93 million VND (\$4,000) per month. Additionally, some international schools provide expatriate teachers with housing allowances, covering rent costs of around 20–22 million VND (approximately \$1,000) per month (Ibid.). School principals at these institutions can earn up to 160 million VND (\$7,000 – \$10,000) per month (Ibid.).

For local Vietnamese teachers, salaries generally range from 20 to 50 million VND (\$1,000 – \$2,500) per month. Those working in bilingual international schools also tend to earn high wages, with primary school teachers receiving around 40 million VND (\$2,000) per month and secondary school teachers earning between 60 and 70 million VND (\$2,500 – \$3,000) per month (Quỳnh and Lê, 2019). However, these figures are not universally applicable, as salaries at international schools are not regulated by official policy documents. Nonetheless, Quỳnh and Lê (2019) suggests that expatriate teachers at international schools generally earn more than their Vietnamese colleagues.

The salary scales of Vietnamese teachers at international schools are determined by several factors, including experience, ranking, and the school's location (Vieclamgiaoduc, 2024). In particular, teachers with many years of experience, especially those who have worked in many different countries and have degrees from reputable educational institutions, often receive higher salaries (Ibid.). Moreover, those who hold positions of greater responsibility or take on management roles often receive higher salaries than those working in positions of less responsibility. For example, a teacher who is the head of a particular subject or a teacher who holds an administrative position in a school often earns significantly more than a full-time teacher who does not hold an administrative position. It is also likely that international schools located in large cities or areas with high living costs tend to pay higher salaries than the general average (Ibid.).

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the education reform policies and Vietnam's education system, focusing on public schools and international schools in the non-public sector. The key takeaways from this chapter are:

- The education reform policies echo the neoliberal discourses where countries adopt similar strategies because they are internationally promoted as best practices. This risks marginalising the local epistemology and pedagogical practices and perpetuating neoliberal capitalism in the education landscape. It may have further may have contributed to a growing division between the working conditions of public school and international school teachers.
- While public school teachers are governed by state regulations in terms of qualifications, responsibilities, professional standards, morality standards, and social behaviours, international school teachers' employment conditions vary across institutions. This signifies the necessity to further explore the working conditions of international school teachers in this thesis. Moreover, while public school teachers follow a structured salary and ranking system, international school teachers can earn significantly higher salaries, with variations influenced by experience, qualifications, and location.

Overall, this chapter has established the necessary context for exploring bản sắc of public school and international school teachers. By outlining the system structure, policies, and professional standards, it sets the foundation for the comparative analysis that follows. The next chapter outlines features of Vietnam as a collectivist and socialist society, as well as bản sắc of Vietnamese people.

Chapter 3: Society and the Self in Collectivist, Socialist Vietnam

3.1 Introduction

In this thesis, Vietnam is understood as a postcolonial collectivist and socialist society. Scholars have characterised Vietnam as a collective society (Truong et al., 2017; Tran, 2009) where personal identity is grounded in group-based values (Hofstede, 2011). At the same time, Vietnam's socialism highlights the societal role of individuals and the prioritisation of collective interests over individual's (Nhưng and Nghia, 2024; Ho Chi Minh, 2000). In this sense, the concept of *bản sắc* is embedded in Vietnamese social fabrics. Therefore, in order to study *bản sắc* from a culturally grounded approach, it is crucial to understand features of collectivist and socialist Vietnam.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the characteristics of Vietnamese society by examining the features of individualist and collectivist societies, particularly in terms of their historical roots and epistemology, goals and interests, and approach to relationships. By discussing these two societal structures, the chapter further explores how the “self” is constructed within them. Building upon this discussion, the chapter then discusses the collectivist values and the socialist framework in Vietnam and *bản sắc* of Vietnamese people.

The chapter is structured into three main sections. Section 3.2 examines the features that are prominent in individualist and collectivist societies. Section 3.3 explores the construct of “self”. Section 3.4 discusses Vietnamese society, which is defined by a unique convergence of collectivist traditions and socialist framework. Finally, section 3.5 discusses how *bản sắc* is often understood in Vietnam. The chapter concludes by identifying key takeaways and emphasising the significance of exploring *bản sắc* from a contextually and culturally grounded approach to ensure that the concept remains true to local lived experiences.

3.2 Individualist and collectivist societies

Individualism and Collectivism are often depicted variously in cultural studies, some of which often portray them as two contrasting extremes. Hofstede (2011), in the I-C model positing individualism and collectivism as two poles, describes individualism as a societal structure characterised by loose connections between people. Individualist societies are typically characterised by the emphasis on personal aspects such as personal aims, personal uniqueness, and personal autonomy (Hsu, 1983; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Kim, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995, 2018). Such societies prioritise individual rights, personal agency, the ability to make choices freely, and identity formation based on personal achievements and self-fulfilment (Hofstede, 2011; Waterman, 1984).

On the opposite end of Hofstede's I-C model, collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals in a society are integrated into groups (Hofstede, 2011). In collectivist societies, the boundary between the individual and the community becomes indistinct, and individuals see themselves and are perceived as an integral part of the many social structures they are affiliated with (Ibid.). Thus, collectivist societies are often characterised by their relational nature, linked to the social contexts, societal constraints, societal roles, and group memberships (Miller, 1984; Morris and Peng, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Kim, 1994). Individuals in collectivist societies have a stronger interdependence or socio-centric identity; they see themselves as less distinct from, and more linked to others, and place great importance on maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 1995). Moreover, in collectivist societies, meaning is closely tied to the specific context making individuals more inclined to explain their own and others' conduct to situational factors (Bochner, 1994; Chen and Hunt, 1997). Table 3.1 summarises ten differences between the collectivist and individualist societies, according to Hofstede (2011).

Individualism	Collectivism
Everyone is supposed to take care of him- or herself and his or her immediate family only	People are born into extended families or clans which protect them in exchange for loyalty
"I" – consciousness	"We" –consciousness
Right of privacy	Stress on belonging
Speaking one's mind is healthy	Harmony should always be maintained
Others classified as individuals	Others classified as in-group or out-group
Personal opinion expected: one person one vote	Opinions and votes predetermined by in-group
Transgression of norms leads to guilt feelings	Transgression of norms leads to shame feelings
Languages in which the word "I" is indispensable	Languages in which the word "I" is avoided
Purpose of education is learning how to learn	Purpose of education is learning how to do
Task prevails over relationship	Relationship prevails over task

Table 3.1: Ten differences between the Collectivist and Individualist societies (Hofstede, 2011, p.11)

Research has suggested that individualist societies are dominant in the Western world (Hofstede, 2011; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Fatehi et al., 2020) whereas collectivism is often seen in Eastern Asian societies such as China, Japan, and Vietnam (Ashwill and Thai, 2005; Van Bich, 2013; Borton, 2000; Tran, 2009; Truong et al., 2017; Fatehi et al., 2020). Hofstede et al. (2010) also define collectivist and individualist societies based on the power distance. The Power Distance Index scores (listed for 76 countries) tend to be higher for East European, Latin, Asian and African countries (collectivist societies) and lower for Germanic and English-speaking Western countries (individualist societies) (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2011). Table 3.2 summarises ten differences between the

Small Power Distance and Large Power Distance societies, according to Hofstede (2011).

Small Power Distance	Large Power Distance
Use of power should be legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil	Power is a basic fact of society antedating good or evil: its legitimacy is irrelevant
Parents treat children as equals	Parents teach children obedience
Older people are neither respected nor feared	Older people are both respected and feared
Student-centered education	Teacher-centered education
Hierarchy means inequality of roles, established for convenience	Hierarchy means existential inequality
Subordinates expect to be consulted	Subordinates expect to be told what to do
Pluralist governments based on majority vote and changed peacefully	Autocratic governments based on co-optation and changed by revolution
Corruption rare; scandals end political careers	Corruption frequent; scandals are covered up
Income distribution in society rather even	Income distribution in society very uneven
Religions stressing equality of believers	Religions with a hierarchy of priests

Table 3.2: Ten Differences between Small Power Distance and Large Power Distance Societies (Hofstede, 2011, p.9)

Regardless of the various features of individualist and collectivist societies as defined in research, the main differences are the most announced in four main aspects: (1) historical roots and epistemology, (2) goals and interests, and (3) relationships.

3.2.1 Historical roots and epistemology

The contrast between collectivist and individualist societies is deeply rooted in Western and Eastern historical foundations, which reflects their distinct epistemologies (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Triandis and Trafimow, 2015). Individualism is often associated with Western societies and has historical roots in Christianity – a religion that place great emphasis on the pursuit of truth (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Sampson, 2000; Heath, 2019). Throughout history, this religion has been divided by extremist and intolerant factions who firmly believe in their exclusive possession of the ultimate truth, dismissing all other beliefs as incorrect (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Kagitcibasi (1997) notes that European social structures – particularly from the 16th century onwards – further laid the groundwork for individualistic values. In Western Europe, family dynamics, marriage patterns, and inheritance laws favoured personal autonomy and economic independence, fostering a culture of self-reliance (Ibid.). Wang and Liu (2010) suggest since the Enlightenment (17th century), the adoption of individualist thinking, the emergence of new religious beliefs, the recognition of individual freedoms, and the establishment of a social and civic structure focused on self-fulfilment have laid the groundwork for an individualistic culture. Moreover, the rise of private property and market-driven economic models further reinforced individualistic values (Ibid.). The philosophical underpinnings of individualism can be traced back to Descartes' rationalist philosophy – Cogito, ergo

sum (I think, therefore I am) – which asserts that knowledge originates from individual reasoning and reflects a Christian-influenced search for certainty in knowledge. Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum”, however, is inseparable from coloniality as it is how colonialism introduced a hierarchy of existence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). According to Maldonado-Torres (2007), Western subjects are recognised as fully human, capable of thinking and rationality, while colonised subjects are treated as objects and denied full subjectivity. This epistemological individualism was later adopted by British empiricists, who rejected a priori truths in favour of knowledge derived from individual experience (Kagitcibasi, 1997). Smith’s (1776) utilitarianism and Spencer’s Social Darwinism (1897) further cemented individualism as the foundation of Western modernity, shaping economic and political structures in Europe and the United States. Western modernity is also inseparable from coloniality as it presents itself as a universal and progressive force and has always depended on the exploitation and subjugation of the non-Western (Mignolo, 2011). In other words, Western epistemology has been shaped by colonial power positing knowledge produced in the West as superior (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This notion is further discussed in Chapter 4.

Unlike Western societies, Eastern cultures have long prioritised collectivism, emphasising social harmony. Scholars trace collectivism to Confucian teachings, which emphasise social hierarchy, filial piety, and communal responsibility (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Triandis, 1995; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Truong et al., 2017). Confucianism, though not a religion, provides a moral framework for personal conduct and governance (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Confucius’s teachings stress self-improvement through education, respect for social hierarchy, and harmonious interpersonal relationships (Goldin, 2018; McHale, 2002).

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian ideology is based on four key principles, essential for maintaining stability, peace, and prosperity in state, family, and individual life. The first principle is that social stability depends on hierarchical relationships, known as *wu lun* (five fundamental relationships): Ruler/subject, Father/son, Elder brother/younger brother, Husband/wife, Older friend/younger friend (Ibid.). These relationships are reciprocal, with junior members demonstrating respect and obedience while senior members provide guidance and protection (Ibid.). This principle aligns with large power distance societies, where authority is respected, and hierarchy is viewed as natural and necessary (Hofstede, 2011). In such societies, older individuals are both respected and feared, hierarchy implies inherent inequality, and subordinates anticipate being given orders (Ibid.).

The second principle establishes the family as the model for all social institutions. Individuals are not seen as autonomous beings but as members of a family unit, where personal desires must be subordinated for collective harmony (Ibid.). Harmony is achieved by the preservation of an individual’s “face”, which refers to their dignity, self-respect, and status (Quynh, 2021; Hofstede and Bond, 1988). The third principle stresses reciprocity in relationships, where moral conduct is based on mutual respect and obligation (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). The fourth principle upholds personal

responsibility, advocating for lifelong learning, perseverance, frugality, patience, and self-discipline (Ibid.).

The enduring relevance of Confucian values in Vietnamese context is widely acknowledged (Dam, 1999; McHale, 2002; Truong et al., 2017). Dam (1999) asserts that even Confucian institutions have declined, its moral teachings and social philosophies continue to shape collectivist societies. As cited in McHale (2002), “*nothing escaped the control of Confucian philosophy and ritual teaching*” (p.422).

3.2.2 Goals and interests

In collectivist societies, the emphasis is placed on communal goals and shared interests rather than individual aspirations (Triandis et al., 1990; Chen et al., 1997). Individuals in such societies tend to pursue personal goals that are in harmony with the expectations of their community, striving for achievements that benefit the group as a whole (Chen et al., 1997). According to Parsons (1991), when conflicts arise between individual self-interest and the interests of the group, individuals in collectivist societies are inclined to prioritise the collective good. Ting-Toomey (1988) further elaborates that in collectivist societies, group objectives, collective concerns, and communal needs are prioritised over individual aims, personal concerns, and individual needs.

In contrast, individualistic societies place greater emphasis on personal goals and self-interest. Individuals in such cultures prioritise their own aims, which may or may not align with the objectives of their social groups (Chen et al., 1997; Triandis et al., 1990; Yamaguchi, 1994). For individualists, it is often seen as natural and justified to prioritise personal goals over collective ones, especially when conflicts arise (Parsons, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Research suggests that in individualist societies, achieving personal goals is closely linked to well-being and life satisfaction (Diener and Diener, 1995; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

3.2.3 Relationships

Individualist and collectivist societies exhibit fundamentally different approaches to relationships (Kim et al., 1994; Redding, 1993; Triandis, 1995), aligning with the prioritisation of goals and interests. In collectivist societies, personal traits that align with collective well-being are highly valued, fostering a strong sense of social harmony and interdependence (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995). Consequently, collectivists often prioritise maintaining harmonious relationships over personal ambitions, as their identity is deeply intertwined with communal bonds (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Thus, collectivists value interpersonal relationships even at the expense of task efficiency, whereas individualists often view relationships as instrumental to achieving personal goals (Triandis, 1995, 2018). Furthermore, individualist societies prioritise individual accomplishment, leading

individuals to be more focused on task completion, sometimes at the cost of relationships (Kim et al., 1994; Triandis, 1995). As a result, individuals may prioritise their professional or personal aspirations, sometimes disregarding relational obligations (Chen et al., 1998).

Moreover, in collectivist societies, people belong to strong in-groups from birth, often extended families that provide lifelong security and protection in exchange for unwavering loyalty (Hofstede, 2011). In contrast, individualist societies emphasise self-reliance, expecting individuals to prioritise personal responsibility for themselves, resulting in weaker interpersonal ties (Hofstede, 2011). Kagitcibasi (1997) and Oyserman (1993) argue that even in highly individualist cultures, relationships are crucial for achieving personal goals. The difference lies in the transactional nature of relationships in individualist societies, where connections are often assessed based on cost-benefit analyses. Kim (1994) posits that individualists manage relationships through equity norms, maintaining connections only as long as they are personally beneficial. When the costs of maintaining a relationship exceed its benefits, individualists may dissolve ties and seek new connections that better align with their evolving personal ambitions (Ibid.). This approach to relationships contrasts with collectivist societies, where social bonds are often regarded as permanent and deeply rooted in duty and loyalty (Ibid.). In collectivist societies, individuals are regarded as interdependent and continually aware of the situational context in which they are a part of the larger entity of a collective (Triandis, 1995). Collectivist values are described in a well-known Japanese proverb, “*A nail that sticks out is hammered down*”.

It is crucial to understand features of collectivist and individualist societies when studying bản sắc. This is not only because bản sắc is embedded in Vietnamese society where collectivist values are prominent (see [subsection 3.4.1](#)) but also due to individualist values introduced to the country via globalisation (Nhưng and Nghia, 2024), especially in international schools (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). Thus, in Vietnamese society, at both public school and international schools, there might exist an interplay between these two sets of values that teachers navigate. The individualist and collectivist values are utilised in subsequent chapters to discuss teachers’ bản sắc at public schools and international schools (see [Chapter 8](#) and [Chapter 9](#)).

The next section explores the construct of “self” in collectivist and individualist societies which is central in the conceptualisation of teachers’ bản sắc (see [Chapter 6, subsection 6.3.2](#)).

3.3 The self-construals

The “self” is sometimes conceptualised as a set of distinctive traits and attributes that remain stable over time, representing an individual’s uniqueness and differentiation from others (Rosenberg, 1997; Syngg and Combs, 1949). This perspective assumes that self-concept is decontextualised, existing independently of social influences. However, cross-cultural research challenges this notion by emphasising the social and relational aspects of the self, arguing that the self is shaped by

interpersonal interactions and social norms (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Former studies also posit that the self is not fixed, but rather fluid and overlapping (Ortega, 2001; Deaux and Perkins, 2015).

Cross-cultural research often classifies the self into two primary self-construals: the independent self-construal, which is dominant in individualist societies, and the interdependent self-construal, characterising collectivist societies (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Singelis and Brown, 1995). Singelis and Brown (1995) argue that self-construals serve as key moderators of cultural influence, as it is deeply intertwined with social norms and values. By understanding how individuals conceptualise their sense of self, we can better examine the broader social fabrics that shape identity.

3.3.1. The independent self-construal

According to Singelis and Brown (1995), the independent self-construal refers to a self-concept that emphasises individuality, self-expression, recognition of internal qualities, pursuit of personal goals, and direct communication. This self-construal is predominantly found in individualist societies, such as the United States and Western European nations, where cultural norms encourage autonomy and the cultivation of unique personal characteristics (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). According to Markus and Kitayama (1998), within these societies, individuals are socialised to perceive themselves as distinct entities, reinforcing the belief in an innate sense of individuality.

Markus and Kitayama (1998) conceptualise the independent self-construal through relationships with others. According to the study, an individual carries various aspect of self-identity or the identities (Ibid.). Occasionally, these self-identities overlap with the identities of others, indicating a shared aspect of identity or a specific social role (Ibid.) (e.g., “I am respectful when interacting with my teacher”). However, these aspects of identities are positioned solely within the individual and not usually or completely overlap with others. This phenomenon represents characteristics that remain independent of social contexts and reflects core attributes that persist across time and social situations (Ibid.).

The independent self-construal aligns with the concept of individual self (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Sedikides et al., 2011; Sedikides and Gaertner, 2015) due to the emphasis on individuality. The individual self is made up of those facets of the self-concept that set them apart from other people as a unique arrangement of attributes that set them apart in their particular social setting (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). This type of self-construal reflects the characteristic of individualist societies (see [Section 3.2](#)). Former studies have also stated the significance this self as it is the foundation aspects of the self (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Sedikides and Gaertner, 2001, 2015).

Sedikides and Gaertner (2015), in the Boomerang Model of the Self (BMS), asserts that individuals possess a stable home-based self, which acts as a foundation for their participation in many social groups. Consequently, individuals will consistently go back to their home-based self,

irrespective of the social groups they are involved with. The BMS offers four postulates: (1) The individual self is a consistent and unchanging experience foundation that is resistant to external influences and focused on self-preservation; (2) The individual self serves as a launching pad for exploration, enabling individuals to confidently participate in social groups. While social identities may become temporarily prominent, they do not fundamentally alter the individual's core identity; (3) Despite deep involvement in social groups, individuals ultimately revert to their home-based self. While social affiliations are meaningful and beneficial, the individual self remains the ultimate reference point; (4) External entities, such as organisations and relationships, gain significance only via psychological mechanisms that diminish their importance to the individual self.

3.3.2 The interdependent self-construal

According to Singelis and Brown (1995), interdependent self-construal refers to a self-concept that is adaptable and changeable, with a focus on external and public aspects such as societal standing, roles, and relationships. It involves a sense of belonging and conforming, knowing one's role and behaving accordingly. It is also governed by situational factors and relationships with others (Ibid.). The interdependent self-construal is particularly prevalent in collectivist societies, such as India, Japan, China, Thailand, and others (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). For instance, in Japanese culture, social interactions revolve around assessing situational contexts and adjusting one's behaviour accordingly. This adaptability implies that a person's words and actions are highly context-dependent, shaped by their relational standing in a given interaction (Ibid.). In collectivist societies, a person's self-identity is validated only through interpersonal relationships (Hamaguchi, 1985).

According to Markus and Kitayama (1998), the interdependent self-construal is constructed via the connections with particular others. As noted in the study, an individual exists within a social network and develops shared identities with others (Ibid.). Unlike the independent self-construal, where the self remains stable across situations, individuals with an interdependent self-construal adjust their behaviour based on interpersonal dynamics and shifting social expectations (Ibid.). The core aspects of the interdependent self-construal are anchored in interpersonal connections, meaning that an interdependent self-construal cannot be fully understood in isolation from its broader social context (Hamaguchi, 1985).

As aforementioned, in collectivist societies influenced by Confucianism, there is a focus on integrating or harmonising the many elements of a problem or situation into a cohesive whole. However, it should not be assumed that individuals with an interdependent self-construal are consistently limited by others and lack a sense of personal agency due to the influence of the social environment. Markus and Kitayama (1998) argue that successfully adapting to different interpersonal situations requires a significant level of self-control and agency. However, the exercise of agentic control is largely focused on internal factors such as desires, personal ambitions, and private

emotions. These factors have the potential to disrupt the harmonious balance of interpersonal interactions (Ibid.).

A central characteristic of interdependent self-construal is the heightened significance placed on others in shaping one's actions and decisions (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). This means that individuals with an interdependent self-construal prioritise the needs, goals, and aspirations of others, often to the extent that these become indistinguishable from their own (Ibid.). However, it doesn't mean that those with interdependent self-construal always attend to the needs, desires, and goals of all others. Rather, focusing on others is extremely discerning and will be most prominent in interactions and ties with members of the same social group. In order to sustain such ties and connections, it is necessary to interact with others (Mead, 1934). This necessitates suppressing the subjective "I" viewpoint and instead adopting the objective "thou" perspective (Hsu, 1983).

The interdependent self-construal aligns with the relational self, which emphasises an individual's interpersonal aspect attained via the process of integrating with significant others and understand themselves via relationship with others (Cooley, 1902; Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2015). Thus, the relational self is formed via interpersonal bonds, such as parent-child relationships, friendships, romantic partnerships, as well as role relationships like teacher-student (Brewer and Gardner, 1996).

The interdependent self-construal is also consistent with the collective self as it emphasises one's identification with and belonging to important social groups through conformity (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Sedikides et al., 2011). In addition, the collective self is driven to enhance and protect a positive collective image, which is shown by good views, attitudes, and actions towards members of their in-groups (Sedikides et al., 2011). In addition, the collective self may achieve the most effective degree of self-definition by satisfying both the demand for assimilation via comparisons between various groups and the need for distinctiveness through comparisons within the same group (Brewer and Roccas, 2015).

Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe (2015) suggest that the collective self incorporates the in-group in the self, leading us to treat these in-groups with the same consideration as we would treat ourselves. Simultaneously, the collective self resorts to discriminating against those outside the group (discrimination toward the out-groups). Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe (2015) propose that individuals engage in discrimination against the out-group by displaying a bias towards the in-group, favouring them more positively, and deliberately allocating more valued resources to the in-group rather than the out-group. Therefore, the collective self is attained via being part of extensive social groupings and comparing one's own group (known as the in-group) to other relevant groups (Sedikides and Brewer, 2015; Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2015; Brewer and Roccas, 2015).

The collective self is, therefore, contingent upon the characteristics of social comparison, which specifically identify the pertinent aspects of identification and group stereotypes (Spears, 2015). From this perspective, the collective self is related to social identity and self-categorisation/

social categorisation as we are socially established largely in terms of being part of a group. Social categories are formed and shown as prototypes, which are imprecise collections of characteristics that define ideas, emotions, and actions that highlight similarities among individuals within a group and differentiate that group from others (Hogg, 2015). When individuals are socially classified, they are mentally grouped with the appropriate prototype, and their similarities to the prototype are emphasised (Ibid.). Thus, from this perspective, the collective self is socially constructed, emerging through group identification, social comparison, and adherence to group norms. As a result, the conception of self in collectivist societies is deeply embedded in social structures, where personal identity is inseparable from group identity and from relationships with others.

3.3.3 The “multiplicitous” and overlapping self

The prominence of interdependent self-construal in Eastern societies and independent self-construal in Western ones (Markus and Katayama, 1998) does not rule out the possibility of coexistence between these two types of self-construals within any given person. Due to globalisation, the values of one society have been introduced to another (Nhung and Nghia, 2024; Tomlinson, 1991). Therefore, the independent and interdependent self-construals might overlap in an individual as they experience different values by engaging in different social groups. Cultural and social studies have argued on the “multiplicitous” and overlapping self as individuals engage in various social settings (Mead, 1934; Deaux and Perkins, 2015; Ortega, 2001, 2016; Goffman, 2023). These concepts of overlapping selves are essential theories to discuss teachers’ bản sắc in the subsequent chapters (see Chapter 7-10). Building on these theories, the thesis does not posit bản sắc as a fixed concept but rather dynamic and fluid. Moreover, despite situated within the collectivist Vietnamese society, bản sắc is not theorised as being solely informed by collectivist features. Therefore, examining the overlapping dimensions of the self is essential to capturing the fluidity, complexity and nuance of bản sắc in this study.

The Kaleidoscopic Model of Self

Deaux and Perkins (2015) propose a Kaleidoscopic Model of Self to address the overlapping selves. Using the kaleidoscope metaphor, the research argues that individuals may prioritise relational aspects when expressing their sense of self at some times, emphasise collective characteristics at other times, and integrate all forms of self-construal on different occasions (Ibid.). Deaux and Perkins (2015) also proposes that the relationship between these types of self-construal is contingent upon the perspective angle and social situation. Societal expectations targeting a group to which an individual identifies, such as teachers, can impact the collective/ interdependent self-construal (Ibid.). Meanwhile, remark regarding someone’s attire or hairstyle can initially impact their independent self

(Deaux and Perkins, 2015). For example, when teachers are prohibited from having bright hair dye or nose piercings, these institutional constraints then influence how they navigate their personal preferences (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.4](#)). While this example may be taken on the independent self-construal, Deaux and Perkins (2015) argue that this direct impact is temporary. If each self-construal is intricately interconnected with the others, then the ultimate response to the event will reach its peak at the area where these self-construals intersect or converge. Hence, the subsequent action or behaviour that ensues from the incident signifies an intricate interplay among all types of the self. One specific kind of self-construal may have a temporary impact, but all forms of self-construal ultimately influence an individual's future behaviours (Ibid.). The implication of the Kaleidoscopic Model of Self is, therefore, twofold: (1) There is usually, if not always, a connection between the independent and interdependent self-construals and (2) Their co-occurrence or shared prominence is not just due to situational instigation but rather indicates the fundamental structure of self-construals (Deaux and Perkins, 2015).

The “I” and “Me”

Similar to the independent and interdependent self-construals that are construed in society through social interaction and relationships, Mead's (1934) concept of social self is conceptualised through two interrelated components – the “I” and the “Me”. Mead describes the “I” as the spontaneous, impulsive, and creative aspect of the self. It represents personal agency, free will, and individuality, acting independently of external constraints. The “Me,” in contrast, embodies the internalised expectations and norms of society. It is the socially reflective component of the self, shaped by the attitudes and values of the broader community. While the “Me” ensures conformity and regulates behaviour in accordance with social norms, the “I” responds to these norms, challenging or redefining them.

In many cases, the “I” aligns with the “Me”, ensuring that actions conform to established societal expectations. For instance, teachers might feel the urge to challenge societal expectations (“I”) but hesitate due to the fear of social repercussions (“Me”), ultimately choosing to remain silent or conform. However, the “I” can also resist societal norms, leading individuals to challenge or redefine them. For example, a teacher might form close and supportive relationships with students, prioritising emotional connection, even though society expects that teachers should be authority figures (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)). By resisting the “Me”, individuals could contribute to the evolution of social norms, shaping the very structures that once influenced them. As Mead (1934) asserts, every person has responsibilities in a group as well as rights; he is a citizen and a part of the community, but he is also someone who responds to the community and shapes it via his actions.

Mead also developed the concept of “The Generalised Other”, which refers to the internalised understanding of societal norms, values, and attitudes. The generalised other represents the collective

perspective of society, extending beyond direct interactions with specific individuals (Mead, 1934). Through socialisation, individuals come to understand what is expected of them not only in particular relationships but as members of a broader social system (Ibid.). Through exposure to the generalised other, individuals shape their “Me”, learning how to behave in ways that align with their social roles. For instance, in a collective society where hierarchical relationships are emphasised, a child initially follows the rules set by their family to respect the elders, but over time, they understand that being respectful to the elders is a general expectation in society (the generalised other). This broad social expectation becomes part of their “Me”, influencing their behaviour outside of their family. Mead (1934) argues that the generalised other allows individuals to reflect on how their actions fit within larger social contexts. By internalising societal perspectives, individuals anticipate how their behaviour will be judged and adjust accordingly.

Thus, Mead’s theory illustrates that identity is neither entirely fixed by social structures nor wholly determined by individual agency. Instead, it is an ongoing process of negotiation, where individuals internalise societal norms while also exerting personal influence on their social world. The work of Mead is one of the foundational theories employed to discuss how teachers conceptualise their bản sắc (see [Chapter 7](#)). However, it is important to acknowledge that Mead’s concept of the “I” and the “Me” is grounded in individualist epistemologies, typically associated with Western philosophical traditions (Mead, 1934). While the “Me” represents the internalised attitudes of the social group – indicating the way an individual comes to understand themselves through the perspective of others – it remains fundamentally centred on the individual’s interpretation of the social world. In this framework, although the social context is significant, it primarily informs the individualist self-concept. As such, Mead’s theory prioritises the formation of the self from an individualistic standpoint, with limited attention to the relational and collective values that are central to collectivist cultures. This individual-centric view of self leaves little room for the “We” in the “I” – that is, the embeddedness of the self within a society shaped by collective responsibility, shared values, and interdependence.

New mestiza - the “multiplicitous” self

Ortega’s (2001) concept of “New Mestizas” builds upon Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) notion of mestiza consciousness, offering a decolonial perspective on understanding the self. The term mestiza originates from the Spanish colonial period and historically refers to women of mixed race, particularly “indigenous” Spanish heritage. This term was used widely in Latin America under Spanish rule, and it carried social and political implications, often related to one’s status, rights, and identity (Boudewijn, 2020). The “New Mestizas” offers valuable insights into postcolonial identity, and the complex ways in which individuals navigate across different social contexts and social values. It challenges rigid epistemic binary oppositions (e.g., Western vs. non-Western, individualist vs.

collectivist) and instead promote fluid, intersectional understandings of self. Thus, the New Mestiza provides a framework for understanding identity as dynamic, relational, and constantly in negotiation. The work of Ortega is particularly relevant to bản sắc as it rejects fixed notions of identity and views identity as relational, shaped by context, power, and cultural expectations. Reflecting on New Mestiza's "borderland", Vietnamese teachers working in international schools or public schools may similarly navigate multiple cultural values (Vietnamese traditions, Western influences, institutional norms). Moreover, this thesis conceptualises bản sắc as embedded within the Vietnamese social fabric, including social norms, making the concept of the "New Mestiza" a powerful analytical tool. Its emphasis on how individuals contest dominant norms offers a relevant framework for understanding how Vietnamese teachers navigate their bản sắc (see [Chapter 9, section 9.4](#) and [Chapter 10, subsection 10.4.2](#)).

Ortega explores how individuals navigate multiple cultural, social, and linguistic worlds, conceptualising this experience through the dual existence of "being in worlds" and "being between worlds". She contends that identity exists across borderlands. As an individual travels from one 'world' to another, they may experience multiple overlapping selves (Ibid.). Ortega (2001) describes "being in worlds" as the experience of belonging to multiple social, cultural, and epistemic spaces. She argues that this is not merely a physical experience of occupying multiple environments but an ontological state – a way of being shaped by the different worlds one inhabits. This means that spatial location is not the primary determinant of being-in-worlds. Thus, "being in worlds" is not about the ontic numerical selves but an overlapping ontological state of selves. It is about how an individual experiences and internalises the different worlds they belong to (Ortega, 2016). Conversely, "being between worlds" refers to the liminality experienced by those who exist at the intersection of multiple cultural frameworks. Instead of fully integrating into one specific world, individuals in this state occupy a borderland where they must negotiate conflicting cultural norms, expectations, and values (Ortega, 2001). This can lead to a sense of ambiguity as one may be tugged in opposite ways by the rules, customs, and beliefs of separate worlds. Through ambiguity and confusion, an individual develops a continuous sense of self (Ibid.).

In this sense, the "New Mestiza" proposes the "multiplicitous self" – a self that is neither singular nor fixed but instead overlapping (Ortega, 2016). By challenging the understanding of the "I", Ortega posits that there is no underlying, unchanging self that remains the same across different worlds. Instead, each "I" manifests differently in different social contexts, meaning that individuals unconsciously transition from one version of the self to another depending on the world they occupy at a given moment. Thus, the "multiplicitous self" is a self that is not singular or fixed but rather shaped by multiple, overlapping memberships in different social groups (Ortega, 2016). As Ortega points out, "being in worlds" and "being between worlds" are inherently connected, and the New Mestiza self does not exist strictly within one world or another but rather oscillates between them to varying degrees (Ortega, 2016).

Backstage and front-stage behaviours

Goffman's (2023) concept of "frontstage" and "backstage" behaviour suggests a dynamic between the different self-construals. The frontstage refers to the public, performative aspect of social life, where individuals present a version of themselves that fits societal expectations. This is where people manage impressions, adhere to social norms, and perform roles that align with what is expected in a particular setting (Ibid.). For example, a teacher in a classroom setting adopts a professional, authoritative demeanour, ensuring their tone, attire, and behaviour reflect what is expected of them as a teacher. By doing so, they suppress personal interests or informal speech to maintain credibility and authority in front of students and colleagues. Meanwhile, the backstage represents private spaces where individuals can step out of their social roles and be more authentic, relaxed, or even contradictory to their front-stage self (Goffman, 2023). It is a space where people feel less pressure to conform to societal expectations and can reveal hidden emotions, opinions, or behaviours (Ibid.).

Goffman highlights that individuals are constantly shifting between frontstage and backstage behaviours, depending on their audience and social context (2023). Nonetheless, the boundaries between these spaces are not always rigid, and backstage behaviour can sometimes slip into the frontstage and vice versa. Moreover, Goffman (2023) notes that backstage behaviour is not always completely free of performance – people may still manage impressions even in private spaces, especially if they are among close colleagues or family members. Goffman's theory provides a valuable insight for this thesis to examine how teachers conform to social norms in public spaces, yet often diverge from these norms in more private, closed-door contexts (see [Chapter 10, subsection 10.4.2](#)).

Goffman's concept of front-stage and back-stage behaviours aligns with Ortega's multiplicitous self (2001) and Markus and Katayama's independent/interdependent self-construal (1998) as individuals shift among different selves depending on their social settings and in a social context, they can experience multiple self-construals. These concepts are incorporated throughout the discussion of how both group of teachers conceptualise bản sắc ([Chapter 7](#)) and how they navigate their bản sắc at work and in Vietnamese society ([Chapter 8 – 10](#)).

3.4 Vietnam as a collectivist and socialist society

Drawing on the literature on individualist and collectivist societies as well as the self-construals presented in the previous section, this section discusses feature of Vietnamese society. In such a society, the collectivist values and socialist framework together shape Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems, and ultimately the identity of Vietnamese people. However, the

thesis does not contend that in Vietnam there only exists collectivist values or solely one type of self-construal. The purpose of this section is to discuss prominent features of Vietnamese society as traditionally established. This section lays the foundation for discussing bản sắc through the interplay between the local Vietnamese traditions and the Western influences in subsequent chapters. Throughout the section, examples of education and teachers are incorporated where relevant.

3.4.1 The collectivist values

Scholars have consistently described Vietnamese society as predominantly collectivist, even in the era of globalisation (Ashwill and Thai, 2005; Van Bich, 2013; Borton, 2000; Tran, 2009; Truong et al., 2017). In such a society, collectivist values are deeply embedded, influencing the prominence of the interdependent self-construal. These values manifest in various aspects such as the Vietnamese language, Confucianism, and the country's geography and history.

Vietnamese language

The Vietnamese language system reflects the collectivist emphasis on social relationships and hierarchical positioning. The pronoun system in Vietnamese is particularly illustrative of the interdependent self-construal, as individuals select pronouns based on their relationship with others rather than using a neutral first-person singular pronoun (“tôi”). In social contexts, individuals refer to themselves with relational pronouns, such as “con” (child), “cháu” (grandchild), or “em” (younger sibling) when speaking to elders, and “tao” or “tớ” when addressing peers (Cái tôi của người Việt Nam qua một giai đoạn phát triển, 2011). The choice of pronouns is not arbitrary; rather, it is governed by social hierarchy, which considers factors such as age, career, familial roles, and kinship structures (Cái tôi của người Việt Nam qua một giai đoạn phát triển, 2011; Tran, 1999). This linguistic hierarchy extends into the education system, where teachers refer to themselves as “thầy” (male teacher) or “cô” (female teacher), signifying higher hierarchical positions, while students use “con” or “em” to acknowledge their lower status in the social order. The intricate system of hierarchical pronouns reflects the interdependent self-construal, where one identifies oneself based on one's relationship with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1998).

The same collectivist values also reflect in non-verbal languages in Vietnam. Vietnamese people express respect and traditional values through gestures such as bows, nods, and smiles, as well as by avoiding direct eye contact, especially with elders or those of higher status (Tran, 1999). Therefore, in Vietnamese culture, avoiding eye contact is a sign of deference, reinforcing the importance of maintaining social harmony. Other culturally significant gestures include the nod, which can signify a greeting, agreement, or active listening without necessarily implying consent or dissent. Smiling plays a crucial role in nonverbal communication, conveying a wide range of

meanings depending on the context, such as friendliness, politeness, or even discomfort (Quynh, 2021). Conversely, certain gestures – such as winking (especially at the opposite sex), beckoning someone with an index finger, placing hands in pockets while speaking, or pointing at someone – are considered inappropriate or disrespectful (Ibid.). Touching another person’s head, especially of someone of a higher hierarchical position, is generally viewed as a sign of disrespect, as the head is considered sacred in Vietnamese belief systems (Ibid.).

Confucian influence

Vietnamese collectivist values are deeply rooted in Confucianism, which have shaped social norms for thousands of years (Truong et al., 2017). Confucianism upholds a rigid social hierarchy based on relationships and reciprocal obligations. The philosophy enforces the belief that distinctions in status and power are both natural and justified, thereby contributing to a large power distance in society (Hofstede et al., 2010).

One of Confucianism’s most enduring influences is the hierarchical order of “King-Teacher-Father”, which establishes the high societal standings of teachers in Vietnamese culture, a respect that persists even in contemporary times (Dung and Pereira, 2022). Additionally, Confucianism posits that individuals are not autonomous but integral parts of a broader society (Truong et al., 2017). Thus, fulfilling one’s societal roles is essential for maintaining harmony and stability (Ibid.). This principle is particularly evident in the education system, where teaching is not merely a profession but also a significant societal duty (Dung and Pereira, 2022). In everyday life, parents commonly refer to their children’s teachers with respect, mirroring how students address them (Ibid.).

Moreover, Confucianism emphasises social harmony and filial piety at the expense of individual gains (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Thus, in a collective society like Vietnam, individuals choose politeness methods to fulfil the need to promote a positive social reputation for everyone while simultaneously recognising the importance of preserving their own “face” alongside others (Quynh, 2021).

Geographical and historical impacts

The collectivist values of Vietnamese society were historically reinforced by village-based social structures, which developed due to the country’s geographical and weather conditions (Cái tôi của người Việt Nam qua một giai đoạn phát triển, 2011; Trần, 2006). Vietnam’s agricultural culture required farmers to work collaboratively, fostering a culture of mutual dependence and communal solidarity (Trần, 2006). Additionally, the country’s vulnerability to natural disasters due its geographical location, such as floods and typhoons, necessitated strong social cohesion to collectively withstand and recover from environmental challenges (Ibid.). As Trần (2006) explains, “*The resilient*

struggle to natural challenges through thousands of years has been tempering the unyielding character and closely-united spirit within communities of Vietnamese people” (as cited in Quynh, 2021, p.11). Consequently, collectivity has dominated individuality in the identity of the local populations, and the “I” (tôi) is dependent on the “We” (ta) (Dang, 2014) rather than the “Me” (Mead, 1934). This notion aligns with Markus and Kitayama’s (1998) framework of the interdependent self-construal.

Furthermore, Triandis and Trafimow (2015) argue that societies with a long history of warfare tend to develop stronger collectivist values. This is particularly true for Vietnam, a nation that has spent over a thousand years building and defending itself from foreign invasions (Quynh, 2021). From the early days of nation-building under King Hùng’s leadership, the Vietnamese people resisted invasions from former Chinese dynasties such as the Han and Song. More recently, Vietnam fought for nearly a century against French colonial rule (1858–1954) and thirty years against American invasion (1954–1975) (Ibid.).

In general, Vietnamese society places familial and communal values above individual concerns (Trần, 2006). This prioritisation of collective harmony over individual concerns means that the independent self-construal is often overshadowed by the interdependent self-construal. An individual’s identity is inseparable from their community, family, and social obligations, and if removed from these social structures, they risk becoming meaningless to society (Quynh, 2021). Vietnamese proverbs encapsulate this deeply embedded collectivism, such as “*Một con ngựa đau cả tàu bỏ cỏ*” (One sick horse, the whole stable refuses grass), “*Môi hở răng lạnh*” (When the lips are gone, the teeth are cold), metaphorically conveys the idea that individual well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of the community (Ibid.). As Quynh (2021) points out, the Vietnamese identity is affected and determined by collectivistic characteristics.

Collectivism represents a preference for a tightly knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society’s position on this dimension is reflected in whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of ‘I’ or ‘we’.

(National Culture, 2021 as cited in Quynh, 2021, p.12).

The deeply rooted collectivist nature of Vietnamese society continues to shape interpersonal relationships, education, identity, and broader social structures, even as the country navigates the complexities of globalisation.

3.4.2 The socialist framework

Since the unification in 1975, Vietnam has been established as a socialist republic, where socialist principles are deeply intertwined with collectivist ideals and the Vietnamese national identity. Vietnamese national identity is strongly constructed around socialist ideology, anti-colonial

resistance, national independence, and self-determination, with Ho Chi Minh's ideologies serving as the guiding framework for the policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Van Duc, 2018; Nguyen, 2022; Tram and Ngoc Huy, 2021; Goscha, 2016).

Ho Chi Minh's philosophies have played a crucial role in shaping Vietnamese socialism, influencing both political governance and everyday life. His ideologies emphasise communal harmony and national unity, viewing solidarity as a fundamental strength for the nation's success (Ho Chi Minh, 2000). Ho Chi Minh's ideologies also state the significance of the societal role of individuals as they must prioritise the collective interests over their own. He asserts:

Every citizen must sacrifice his own interests for the sake of the country, enthusiastically support the resistance against foreign aggression, strive to increase production, and eliminate those who betray the country and harm the people, to make our motherland unified and independent. That is integrity.

(Ho Chi Minh, 2000, as cited in Cam-Lien and Long, 2021, p.217)

This principle informs Vietnamese socialism, which emphasise self-sacrifice, patriotism, and collective responsibility (Nhung and Nghia, 2024). In this framework, individual contributions are seen as essential to national development, and the moral worth of a citizen is measured by their dedication to communal and national interests.

According to Nhung and Nghia (2024), Vietnamese socialist principles are deeply embedded in the spiritual and ethical fabric of the nation, shaping human relationships, societal structures, and national priorities. Vietnamese socialism reflects the dignity and moral character of individuals, communities, ethnic groups, and the nation as a whole, reinforcing the idea that identity is rooted in shared values and collective aspirations. In Vietnamese socialism, "values" is usually defined by national values and recognised by the nation (Ibid.).

The historical process of defending national independence and unity has been instrumental in fostering Vietnamese national values over thousands of years. In 2014, the 9th Conference of the Party Central Committee issued a resolution on culture and people, outlining the core values that define Vietnam's national identity. These values include:

Passionate patriotism; National self-respect and self-strength; Community spirit of harmonious connection between individuals - family - community - Fatherland; Kindness, tolerance, respect for love and morality; Diligent and creative in work; Making noble sacrifices for the sake of national independence and the happiness of the people; Civilized and polite behaviour; Simplicity and purity in lifestyle.

(Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014 as cited in Nhung and Nghia, 2024, p.14)

These principles form the foundation of Vietnamese society, ensuring that national identity remains strong amidst global changes. Nhung and Nghia (2024) further highlight that promoting national values within an evolving cultural landscape is essential for sustaining Vietnam's national identity in the modern era.

Overall, Vietnamese society is deeply rooted in collectivist values and socialism, which have been reinforced by its historical struggles for national independence, the influence of Confucianism, and the ideological framework of Ho Chi Minh. Collectivism is reflected in social hierarchies, language structures, and cultural norms, emphasising collectivity over individuality, social harmony, and societal roles. These values are further entrenched in Vietnam's socialism, which prioritises national unity, patriotism, and self-sacrifice for the collective good. These values have shaped *bản sắc* of Vietnamese toward favouring the collective over individual concerns, suggesting the prominence of the interdependent self-construal.

3.5 Bản sắc of Vietnamese people

Although *bản sắc* (identity) appears frequently in Vietnamese textbooks and media (e.g., books, newspaper, social media, policy documents), it remains underexplored in empirical research. Vietnamese writers often associated *bản sắc* with “*bản sắc văn hóa*” (cultural identity) and “*bản sắc dân tộc*” (national identity) (Phan, 2010; Ngô, 2014; Nguyen, 2014; Minh Chi, 2007), signifying the prominence of collectivist values and the socialist framework in *bản sắc*.

According to Minh Chi (2007), *bản sắc* is constituted of “*bản*” and “*sắc*”. While *bản* is the root, the basis, the core, the nucleus of a thing or a person, *sắc* refers to what's seen on the outside. He further notes that Vietnamese *bản sắc dân tộc* (national identity) comprises the original, foundational, and enduring core values of the Vietnamese people (Ibid.). These core values do not encompass all cultural attributes, but rather the most typical, stable, and long-lasting characteristics (Ibid.). They are so deeply embedded in the national consciousness that they are reflected across various domains of Vietnamese life, including literature, art, theatre, painting, sculpture, architecture, as well as in everyday practices, communication, and social interactions (Ibid.).

Ngô (2014) defines *bản sắc* in relation to *bản sắc văn hóa* (cultural identity). He contends that *bản sắc văn hóa* is a combination of characteristics of Vietnamese culture, which have been formed, existing and developing throughout the long history of Vietnam (Ibid.). These cultural characteristics are stable, lasting, abstract, and even hidden. Similarly, Nguyen (2014) posits that Vietnamese cultural identity is the nucleus, the deepest core, most essential, and most unique characteristics of Vietnamese culture. Therefore, to recognise *bản sắc*, we must go through countless cultural nuances (Ngô, 2014).

Significantly, both Ngô (2014) and Nguyen (2014) argue that cultural identity and national identity are inseparable. Thus, in order to understand *bản sắc* of Vietnamese people, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of Vietnamese cultural and national identity.

Phan (2010), in his influential book *Bản sắc Văn hóa Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Cultural Identity), defines *bản sắc văn hóa* (cultural identity) as unique to Vietnamese people; it is a generationally inherited identity rooted in Vietnam's collectivist and socialist values, particularly

those influenced by Ho Chi Minh's ideology. Central to this identity are two pillars: the nation and the family. National identity is emphasised as *bản sắc* was shaped through centuries of resistance against foreign domination, from Chinese dynasties to French and American colonisation. This cements a strong sense of unity as the nation has been fighting for independence. The familial aspect is rooted in the Confucian principle of "hiếu" (filial piety), reflected in practices such as respect for the elders in family and ancestor worship. However, Phan (2010) notes that Vietnamese Confucianism diverges from the Chinese Confucian principles as they are shaped by village-based social structures and agricultural traditions. These collectivist values are significant in Vietnamese cultural identity as it creates solidarity and attachment among community members (Ibid.). From these two fundamental aspects, other aspects of Vietnamese cultural identity emerged. For example, Áo dài – Vietnamese traditional dress; Bánh chưng and bánh dày – two types of traditional cakes that are indispensable during the Lunar New Year and other important festivals, symbolising heaven and earth; expressing children's gratitude to their ancestors; Vietnamese human cultural arts; Vietnamese traditional architecture; Vietnamese cuisine.

According to Phan (2010), in cultural identity exists a stability. He uses an example of a performer on a string; the performer can perform a variety of movements as long as he stays balanced on the string. In this metaphor, the string represents the stability and underscores the resilience of Vietnamese cultural identity – capable of interacting with other cultures without losing its core. As noted by Phan (2010), such stability helps avoid cultural extremes such as radical Confucianism or extreme socialism, enabling Vietnam to preserve its *bản sắc* amid global influences. Thus, it is essential for this thesis to consider the stable features of teachers' *bản sắc* in the context of education reform.

Phan and La (2020) study *bản sắc* through the interplay between personal identity and social identity, viewing identity as socially situated rather than individual. Personal identity is representative of features that are unique for an individual (Phan and La, 2020). However, as every individual exists in a society and is inseparable from society, *bản sắc* also focuses on the shared features of many people having the same role (or belonging to the same group), positions an individual in social interaction, guides an individual's behaviours, and fosters social relationship development (Ibid.). In this sense, the "individual" in *bản sắc* is rather relative than definite as there must be a social context and social interaction for personal identity to be perceived (Ibid.). Meanwhile, social identity is about the connection between members of society and forming a collective identity. Social identity is the perception of oneself as a part of a social group (Ibid.). However, the work of Phan and La (2010) is theoretical rather than empirical, drawing mainly on Western identity frameworks (e.g., Goffman, 2023; Hogg and Reid, 2006; Burke, 2004, as cited in Phan and La, 2010). Phan and La (2010) highlight the need to examine the interplay between personal and social identity in the Vietnamese context.

The lack of culturally grounded conceptualisation of bản sắc in empirical research poses a gap in the field, particularly in identity of Vietnamese teachers. In the context of education reform when non-traditional ideas are introduced into the education landscape, it is crucial to understand the interplay between individualism and Vietnamese collective values and socialism. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of bản sắc as a dynamic negotiation between different value systems.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the complex features of individualist and collectivist societies in shaping the concept of self. The key takeaways from this chapter are:

- The historical and epistemological roots, goals and interests, and relationship suggest that collectivist societies prioritise interdependence, social harmony, and group obligations, whereas individualist societies emphasise autonomy, personal achievement, and self-expression.
- Aligning with features of collectivist and individualist societies, the independent self-construal is prominent in individualist Western societies, while interdependent self-construal is more common in collectivist societies in the East. However, these self-construals do not exist separately. Instead, they often overlap, underscoring the fluid and dynamic nature of identity and demonstrating how self-construals vary across social contexts. Kim (1994) and Triandis (1995) have highlighted that individuals and society often exhibit characteristics of both individualism and collectivism. Thus, it's essential to consider that *“individualism and collectivism are, after all, primarily cultural differences, and not templates of the self”* (Spears, 2015, p.185).
- Vietnam is a collectivist society shaped by hierarchical language, Confucian influences, geographical location and agricultural history. It is also a postcolonial socialist society shaped by a long history of resistance wars; and its socialist framework is informed by Ho Chi Minh's ideologies. Moreover, the self in Vietnamese society is consistent with the interdependent self-construal (Markus and Katayama, 2014) with a focus on the “We” rather than the “I”. The works of Vietnamese writers further indicate the crucial role of national identity and cultural identity in bản sắc (Minh Chi, 2007; Nguyen, 2014; Ngô, 2014). Notably, in bản sắc exist core values that remain unchanged amidst global influences (Phan, 2010). Thus, in the context of education reform where neoliberal capitalist principles are introduced to the country, it is essential to also consider both the stability and fluidity in bản sắc.

This chapter acknowledges the nuanced nature of individualism and collectivism, limited empirical research on bản sắc, ultimately arguing for a culturally grounded approach to identity. Theories elaborated in this chapter are employed to construct the conceptual framework of bản sắc in Chapter 6.

Chapter 4: From Colonial Discourse to Epistemic (Re)claiming

4.1 Introduction

Vietnam's history of resistance wars against France (1858 – 1954) and America (1954 – 1975) marks it as a postcolonial site. Despite the formal end of colonial rule, the colonial legacies continue to shape political, economic, cultural systems, and education. These lingering effects position Vietnam within the broader postcolonial discourse, where colonial power structures remain embedded in contemporary institutions and knowledge production. In this context, postcolonial theory provides a crucial theoretical framework for this thesis as it examines these legacies, interrogates how colonial domination persists through structures of knowledge, language, and cultural hegemony – especially when education reform aligns with the global agendas on policies. Importantly, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the concept of *bản sắc* is embedded in Vietnamese collectivist and socialist social fabrics which are shaped by the history of resistance wars. Therefore, postcolonial theory not only helps unpack the colonial discourse but also facilitates an understanding of how *bản sắc* is shaped by and even resists dominant ideological forces.

Building on postcolonial theory, the thesis adopts a decolonial approach that challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and advocates for epistemic justice. Decolonial thinking foregrounds the (re)claiming of Vietnamese ways of knowing and being. In doing so, this chapter argues for the centring of Vietnamese epistemology as a critical lens for understanding teacher's *bản sắc*.

This chapter is structured into four main sections.

[Section 4.2](#) examines colonialism and the significance of colonial discourse. [Section 4.3](#) explores central themes in postcolonial theory, including language, the construction of knowledge, as well as identities of the marginalised. Drawing on postcolonial theory, [section 4.4](#) discusses the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism in the Vietnam education system. Lastly, [section 4.5](#) discusses the decolonial thoughts of this thesis by critically examining Eurocentrism underlying in postcolonial studies and addressing the significance for this thesis to (re)claim Vietnamese epistemology and foster the ecology of knowledge. This chapter plays an important role in informing the researcher's positionality. Thus, relevant aspects of postcolonial theory are discussed in relation to the researcher's positionality throughout the chapter.

4.2 Colonialism and colonial discourse

4.2.1 Colonialism

In postcolonial theory, the prefix “post” does not simply refer to a temporal sequence following colonialism, but rather to the enduring impact of colonial rule on the present world order (Seth, 2011). Postcolonial theory, therefore, cannot be meaningful without grounding itself in the

historical realities of colonialism alongside its enduring consequences (Ashcroft, 2013; Seth, 2021). Thus, any meaningful engagement with postcolonial theory must be rooted in a firm understanding of the colonial systems and practices that preceded it.

Colonialism is commonly defined as a political and economic practice through which a dominant power establishes control over a foreign territory, often for the purpose of exploiting its resources and people. According to Nkrumah (1965), colonialism served primarily to bind colonies to themselves, with the primary goal of promoting the colonial power's economic advantages (Nkrumah, 1973 as cited in Rukundwa and Van Aarde, 2007). Young (2016) further contends that colonialism, primarily motivated by economic factors, was one of the instruments used to achieve broader imperial objectives. While imperialism denotes the ideological and strategic drive for expansion, colonialism represents its practical execution, typically involving territorial acquisition and the establishment of direct rule (Ibid.). During the Age of Exploration and in the centuries that followed, European powers engaged in colonisation to extend their influence and secure access to labour, raw materials, and markets (Ibid.).

Colonisation were typically shaped by racial hierarchies and underpinned by a Eurocentric set of values, resulting in starkly different experiences for colonised populations (Young, 2016). During colonial rule, the colonisers imposed their language, education systems, legal frameworks, and social hierarchies upon colonised societies, systematically marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices (Young, 2016, 2020; Tomlinson, 1991; Bhabha, 1994). Colonialism, therefore, was not only a political and economic project but also a cultural and epistemological one – redefining the identity, knowledge, and sense of self of colonised peoples.

4.2.2. Colonial discourse

Colonial discourse refers to the body of knowledge, representations, narratives, and ideological frameworks produced by colonial powers to legitimise and sustain their domination over colonised territories and peoples. It encompasses the language, knowledge, and practices through which colonialism was legitimised and maintained. This discourse constructs and perpetuates certain views of both the colonisers and the colonised, shaping power relations and social hierarchies in the colonial context and beyond.

One of the central tenets of colonial discourse is the idea that colonisers were bringing civilisation, progress, and enlightenment to supposedly “primitive” or “backward” societies (Chatterjee, 2018; Young, 2016). This narrative positioned colonialism as a benevolent and moral endeavour, masking its exploitative realities. It also constructed racial hierarchies by portraying the colonisers as rational, advanced, and superior, while representing colonised populations as irrational, lazy, childlike, or uncivilised (Chatterjee, 2018). These stereotypes were not incidental; they functioned as ideological tools that justified domination and control.

Another key concept of colonial discourse was othering – the process of defining colonised peoples as fundamentally different from and inferior to the colonisers. This binary opposition of “us” versus “them” created a clear distinction between the civilised West and the uncivilised non-West, reinforcing the legitimacy of colonial authority (Said, 1995). Edward Said’s foundational work *Orientalism* highlighted how the West constructed the “Orient” (encompassing Asia and the Middle East) through distorted representations that exoticised, infantilised, and dehumanised non-Western societies. This body of knowledge served as a justification for Western dominance over non-Western societies.

Colonial discourse was propagated through formal institutions such as language and education systems. The colonisers imposed their languages, literature, and epistemologies, positioning Western knowledge as superior while marginalising or erasing indigenous knowledge systems. As Young (2020) notes, colonial histories often depict the non-Western world through Eurocentric lenses, where discovery, progress, and modernity are narrated solely from the perspective of European empires, such as the European ‘discovery’ of America. Such narratives exclude or distort the experiences, contributions, and voices of colonised peoples.

Postcolonial theorists engage with colonial discourse by critiquing these ideological underpinnings. Young (2016) positions postcolonial theory as both a response to and a critique of the legacies of British, French, and American imperialism. In this sense, postcolonialism emerged not just as a theoretical lens but also as a practice aimed at challenging colonial power structures and recovering silenced histories and voices. Through colonial discourse analysis, postcolonial theorists uncover the implicit and explicit racism in European literature and challenge the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in Western knowledge production. For example, Said (1995) examines how language and culture are used to legitimise colonial domination, while Spivak (2004) focuses on the silencing of subaltern voices and the erasure of indigenous subjectivities. Bhabha (1994), in turn, introduces the concept of hybridity to explore the complex identities that emerge from the entanglement of colonial and postcolonial interactions.

4.3 Postcolonial theory

The formal end of colonial rules does not eradicate colonial discourse; rather, such discourse persists in a structural form, continuing to shape the global power hegemony until today. This section explores central themes of postcolonial theory and relevance to this thesis. It highlights how the colonial language determines who can speak and whose voices are marginalised, how knowledge is constructed, and the implications of colonial power on identities of the marginalised. These aspects act as the theoretical framework of bản sắc (see [Chapter 6, subsection 6.3.1](#)) and fosters discussion in subsequent chapters. In this section, the work of postcolonial theorists from various settings are examined and examples of Vietnam are drawn where relevant.

4.3.1 Language

Language and representation have been a core tenet in postcolonial theory as colonial languages have historically been employed to construct images of colonised peoples and thereby reinforce colonial dominance (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Young, 2016). This means language is not merely a tool for communication but a site of power, deeply embedded in the colonial project of cultural hegemony. As Ngũgĩ (1986) argues, the imposition of colonial languages served as a mechanism for controlling not only the minds but also the cultural imaginations of colonised subjects. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" – originally published in 1985 – interrogates how colonial discourse systematically silences or misrepresents the voices of the marginalised. Spivak critiques the ways in which colonial and even postcolonial institutions claim to speak for the oppressed while ultimately reinforcing the structures that render them voiceless (2004). Building on Foucault's (1971, 1982) theories of discourse and power, Young (2016) notes that through institutional ratification, colonial rule significantly established a linguistic hierarchy thereby devaluing the colonised populations' languages and culturally alienating them.

These practices were true in Vietnam under the rule of French colonisation. From the time of its founding until the early 20th century, Vietnam's written language was based on ideogram characters (Chữ Nôm) rooted in feudal Confucian system. However, during French rule in the 19th century, the colonial administration introduced an intellectualism-oriented educational system based on the rote memorising of a canon of texts (chữ Quốc Ngữ) (Phan Le Ha, 2024; Hong Thanh, 2011; Pham, 1998 as cited in Huong and Fry, 2004). During the rule of the United States in the South of Vietnam, the English language made its way into the education system. Between 1958 and 1968, the country's population shifted from speaking French to English (Wright, 2010). According to Huong and Fry (2004), the linguistic dominance had long-term effects on promoting political and social change when the language became more accessible to the general population. This phenomenon echoes the linguistic imperialism with long-term consequences, including cultural alienation, internalised inferiority, and the loss of local epistemologies (Young, 2020; Ngũgĩ, 1986).

Furthermore, education in most colonies was conducted in the language of the colonisers which created a dilemma for local people in terms of which language to write (Young, 2020). In the continued production and circulation of literature written in colonial languages, colonial legacies endure (Ibid.). In Vietnam, this marginalisation was reflected in anti-colonial literary works written in Vietnamese by authors such as Tố Hữu, Nam Cao, and Nguyễn Tuân – figures whose writing captured the lived realities of colonial oppression. These works were part of the researcher's education in the public sector, from lower-secondary to upper-secondary schools. Growing up with these narratives has deeply shaped the researcher's perception of colonial history. Yet, the limited

international recognition of these works underscores hierarchical valuation of languages (Young, 2020). Such a linguistic hierarchy determines who is heard while actively silencing others.

In the globalised contexts, English continues to dominate educational systems, academic publications, and international discourse, shaping who gets to be heard and who remains invisible (Young, 2020). Writers from formerly colonised societies often face the dilemma of writing in the colonial language to gain global visibility, which can come at the expense of cultural authenticity (Ibid.). This linguistic dominance influences not only what is written but also what is considered publishable, translatable, or worthy of academic attention (Ibid.). This situation is reflected in research on Vietnamese identity. Published texts about bản sắc in Vietnamese language, such as the extensive work of Phan (2010) (see [Chapter 3, section 3.5](#)) has not gained enough international attention. This linguistic hegemony sits at the heart of the researcher's positionality in navigating academic publication written in English-language dominance while seeking for Vietnamese written materials in order to (re)centre Vietnamese knowledge and voices. Moreover, the linguistic hierarchy is reflected in the fact that this thesis is written in English rather than Vietnamese, highlighting the researcher's linguistic dilemma. Given the researcher's doctoral study in a European country and the attempt to gain international recognition and academic legitimacy, writing in English is a pragmatic decision. Yet it risks reinforcing the linguistic hegemony that this thesis seeks to challenge. This tension highlights the complex positionality of the researcher. It also demonstrates a struggle for an academic from a postcolonial country when endeavouring to (re)claim the voice of a population that have been historically rendered silenced.

As stated by Kumaravadivelu (2006), "*the coloniality of the English language is undeniable*" and "*so is its globality*" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.13). Schools in many postcolonial nations (e.g., India, Kenya, or the Philippines) continue to teach in the language of the former colonisers, creating an uneven power dynamic that affects the learning of students and, therefore, the entire society (Mirhosseini and De Costa, 2024; Tanu, 2018; Milligan and Tikly, 2018). This notion further marginalises those who speak the local languages (Brock-Utne, 2000; Milligan and Tikly, 2018). For example, Poudel et al. (2022) argue that English-medium instruction in Nepal reinforces colonial legacies by prioritising English over various local languages. This dominance is compounded by Nepali monolingual nationalism, which marginalises the country's linguistic diversity and contributes to the internal colonisation of indigenous languages (Ibid.). As Schmidt (1998) argues, "*Language use and language policy come to symbolise a larger conflict between ethnolinguistic groups over their relative power positions within the political community*" (p.37). In Vietnam, Vietnamese is retained as the national language in public school education and governance, rather than adopting the coloniser's language (Phan Le Ha, 2024). However, English is used as the language of instruction at international schools in the country (Bright and Poole, 2025; Bright, 2022), making English and its implications central in bản sắc of international school teachers (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#)).

Meanwhile, scholars also argue for the occurrence of decolonisation of English through localisation (Lukitasari, 2020; Sharifian, 2013; Savski, 2020; Idrus et al., 2022). According to Lukitasari (2020), speakers of standard English (i.e., American English or British English) are often seen as more intellectual and confident than individuals who use other dialects or possess stigmatised accents. This is no longer relevant due to the emergence of World Englishes in the contemporary period of globalisation (Ibid.). Regional variations of English have been embraced and acknowledged globally, serving to promote the culture of each nation, signifying cultural resistance against linguistic hierarchies (Lukitasari, 2020; Savski, 2020). However, the localisation of English implies an acceptance of the dominance of English over the local languages, potentially reinforcing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. While regional varieties may resist the cultural dominance to foster hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1994), they do so within a framework that continues to use English as the primary medium of communication and education. This phenomenon signifies a paradox which raises concerns about whether the English language as an international language can be decolonised solely through regional adaptation and rejection of speaking standard English. Perhaps, it is more fundamental for decolonial thinkers to rethink the linguistic hierarchies and the value of the local languages. This is the approach of this thesis – utilising Vietnamese terms when discussing bản sắc to amplify the voices of the marginalised.

When the colonial language retains cultural dominance, the local culture is undermined as it is assimilated and adapted within its sphere (Young, 2020). As language functions as a vessel for culture, embodying values, traditions, and collective consciousness, the suppression of local languages results in the disconnection of individuals from their identity (Ngũgĩ, 1986.). This fosters a perception of inferiority and dependence on colonial languages and worldviews, thereby reinforcing colonial power structures (Ibid.). Thus, language is not neutral; it operates as a carrier of colonial power, shaping thought, culture, and knowledge. This dominance not only undermines local languages and epistemologies but also perpetuates power dominance in the construction of knowledge.

4.3.2 Construction of knowledge about the West and non-West

In colonial discourse, the West positioned itself as rational and civilised, constructing the non-West as its irrational, inferior Other (Said, 1995). Such knowledge permeated Western literature, including novels, philosophies, political theories, economic texts, research, and academic discourse, serving both as a Western projection onto the non-West for control (Ibid.). Institutions such as colonial schools or missionary hospitals were key sites for disseminating the coloniser's knowledge, producing "knowledge" about the colonised, and thereby reinforcing power structures (Spivak, 2004). Foucault's analysis highlights that power operates not only through coercion but also through the

creation of “truth” via discourse (1971). Institutional structures, such as education systems, controlled what could be said, who could speak, and what knowledge was deemed legitimate (Chatterjee, 2018).

Postcolonial scholars have further extended this critique by discussing how colonial discourse continues to shape global knowledge hierarchies. Central to postcolonial theory is the notion that Western epistemology – its concepts of knowledge, truth, rationality, and objectivity – is not universally applicable but rather colonially constructed (Seth, 2021). This epistemic dominance has led to what Santos (2015) calls “*epistemicide*” – the silencing and erasure of diverse ways of knowing through colonial processes. Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that Descartes’ “*Cogito, ergo sum*” – the foundational statement of modern Western subjectivity – played a key role in colonial ideology. This Cartesian philosophy, central to Western modernity, contributed to the construction of the rational subject – a subject who is self-aware, autonomous, and capable of critical thought. In the context of colonialism, Descartes’ philosophy implicitly recognised the colonisers as fully human and rational, and thus capable of producing legitimate knowledge. Colonised subjects, by contrast, were denied full subjectivity (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Maldonado-Torres refers to this process as part of “*the colonality of being*” – a form of ontological hierarchy that dehumanises the colonised by denying them full subjecthood. As a result, the colonised were not only materially oppressed but also epistemically rendered invisible or illegitimate within the dominant Western frameworks. The epistemological imbalance is one of the gaps this thesis attempts to address, which are further elaborated in [Chapter 6](#).

The concept of “West” and the “non-West” often appear in colonial discourse as a binary concept reinforcing the cultural hegemony (Said, 1995; Young, 2020) and onto-epistemological hierarchy (Santos, 2025; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). As Young (2020) asserted, “*Western people look at the non-Western world, what they see is often more a mirror image of their own assumptions than the reality of what is there, or of how people outside the West actually feel and perceive themselves*” (Young, 2020, p.2). For Said, the “West” and “non-West” binary has “*helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience*” (Said, 1995, p.1-2). Therefore, the terms “the West” and “the non-West” are not constructed as fixed geographical locations but as ideological and cultural constructs rooted in colonial power relations (Said, 1995; Spivak, 2004). In this binary, the “West” often represents Europe and parts of the world that are heavily shaped by European settlement, colonisation, or ideological influence (Kramer, 2021; Abdulrahman and Mohammed, 2023; Smith, 2013). As noted by Kramer (2021), during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europe was positioned as the epicentre of global civilisation. This positioning extended beyond geography into an ideological domain that included the British dominions and the United States (Abdulrahman and Mohammed, 2023). This civilisational identity was underpinned by values rooted in the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the legacies of imperialism (Smith, 2013; Abdulrahman and Mohammed, 2023).

Modern versions of realism, as Loshkariov (2022) argues, view large non-Western states, including China, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, India, as a threat to the West. They reproduce the imperial rhetoric about containing and punishing the “barbarians” if they are impossible to defeat. As Loshkariov (2022) explains, this logic might be where the conceptual distinction between “great powers” (primarily Western nations) and “revisionist” or “emerging powers” emerged. Similarly, liberal and constructivist paradigms frequently adopt a paternalistic stance, positioning West as the bearers of civilisation tasked with “civilising” non-Western societies – the perceived “barbarians” (Ibid.). Moreover, while some non-Western states did go down the “thorny path” of emulating Western ideas and practices, other non-Western states and polities either vanished or were vanquished in the fight against Western colonisers, meaning that Western modernity eventually replaced them (Loshkariov, 2022). All these nations have, to some degree, taken responsibility for global disparities and the marginalisation of the non-West (Ibid.), further blurring the West/non-West binary.

Such binary distinction, thus, poses a problem for decolonial thinking. Continuing to utilise the colonial constructed terms “West” and “non-West” could unintentionally reinforce the colonial power and Eurocentrism (the West and the Rest). Therefore, in this thesis, the use of the terms “West” and “East” does not denote rigid geographical locations, nor does it aim to reinforce the binaries. Rather, these terms are employed to critically highlight how colonial power has constructed discourses. The objective is to challenge the epistemological imbalance and the rigid distinction of these colonial terms. This perspective echoes Loshkariov’s (2022) notion of “*postcolonialism of interdependence*” and Santos’ (2015) concept of “*ecologies of knowledge*,” which advocate for pluralistic and dialogical understandings of knowledge production.

The thesis looks at the “West” from Vietnamese perspective and conceptualises the “West” not merely from a colonial power position. Rather, the “West” or “Western influences” terms in this thesis refers to sets of cultural norms, values, and epistemology that do not stem from Vietnamese traditions (i.e., collectivism, socialism). Moreover, in the context of globalisation, Western epistemologies are often universalised and framed as “global” within global education policies (Rasiah, 2022; Brent Edwards, 2025). In Vietnamese discourse, foreign influences are commonly referred to as “văn hóa phương Tây” (Western cultures), hence use of the term “West”. Similarly, the thesis does not construct the East as a binary opposition to the West, as often seen in colonial discourse. Instead, the East is understood as a set of characteristics shaped by each country’s own cultures, traditions, values and belief systems. While the term “East” can be associated with Asian societies given certain shared epistemological roots (e.g., collectivism, Confucianism), it is important to recognise that these societies are not homogenous and not all Asian countries are postcolonial nations. Therefore, although this study engages with former research from Asian contexts (e.g., China, Korea, Philippines, India, Indonesia, Japan), it does so with attention to cultural and historical differences and similarities. Insights from these studies are considered critically, without assuming their direct applicability to Vietnam.

4.3.3 Identities of the marginalised

Colonial discourse shaped not just how colonisers viewed the colonised but how colonised peoples were permitted to view themselves (Said, 1995). As Alcoff (2007) contends, identity of the colonised is epistemically consequential: who speaks, from where. This construction of identity was thus not autonomous for the colonised; it was filtered through Western representations that denied complexity, agency, and voice. This means, identities of postcolonial peoples were often fragmented, silenced, or rendered invisible (Spivak, 2004).

Du Bois' double consciousness posits that African Americans are compelled to see themselves both through their own lived experiences and through the derogatory gaze of the white majority (Du Bois, 1903). Postcolonial theorists have extended Du Bois' concept to describe the identity crises faced by formerly colonised people in relation to language, education, and cultural belonging (Abdul-Jabbar 2015, 2019; Gilroy, 2005). For example, Abdul-Jabbar (2015) argues that Arab diasporic identity is similarly shaped by a dual awareness: the internalisation of Western perceptions and the retention of cultural connection to Arab heritage. This duality results in a complex and often conflicted self-perception among Arab individuals when navigating between their cultural identity and the Western societal context (Ibid.).

Bhabha (1994) offers a dynamic account of identity formation, emphasising the potential for resistance. He argues that the colonial subject is shaped by a range of conflicting positions. This complexity positions the subject as both fixed and fantastical, resulting in a process that is inherently uneven, divided, incomplete, and thus potentially resistant (Easthope, 1998). Bhabha (1994) proposes a concept of mimicry, which refers to the way colonised subjects are encouraged, or even coerced, to adopt the language, culture, values, and practices of the coloniser. Despite being a tool of colonial control, mimicry can disrupt colonial power, as the mimic is never a perfect copy but rather "*almost the same, but not quite*" (Ibid., p.122). Thus, mimicry becomes the site of resistance, contributing to the emergence of a hybrid identity. His concept of hybridity challenges the fixed binaries of coloniser/colonised or the West/non-West (Ibid.). This hybrid identity, forged through negotiation allows individuals in postcolonial contexts to reconcile conflicting cultural influences and contest dominant narratives (Papastergiadis, 2021 in Bhandari, 2022). It also foregrounds the importance of local knowledge, language, and lived experience in shaping identity – elements often marginalised by colonial discourses.

Bhabha (1994) further argues that hybrid identity is inevitably produced in-between spaces – the "*Third Space*". This is a conceptual space between established cultural boundaries where identities interact, challenge, negotiate, and transform each other. The local knowledge, language, narratives, and first-hand experiences that each person brings to this "Third Space" are as diverse as the people who inhabit it (Ibid.). The theory posits that hybrid identity disrupts the coloniser's

authority by exposing the constructed and performative nature of cultural identity. It is in this tension and ambivalence, Bhabha suggests, that colonised subjects may subvert colonial power and redefine themselves beyond colonial discourse.

The work of Bhabha has remained relevant in contemporary postcolonial research; many scholars explore the hybrid identity of the historically marginalised. In the study on postcolonial Filipino identities, Azada-Palacios (2022) asserts that the depiction of national identities be seen either as malleable or fixed. Azada-Palacios (2022) further argues that a malleable identity does not negate the influence of past attributes (e.g., race, physical characteristics, native language, ancestral origins) on national identity; however, it acknowledges that the significance attributed to these features changes, often through negotiations. This depiction echoes the characteristics of Vietnamese cultural and national identity (Phan, 2010; Minh Chi, 2007). Phan (2010) argues that despite colonial historical influences, Vietnamese *bản sắc văn hóa* (cultural identity) preserves its core values, signifying both a resistance against colonial dominance and a fluidity. Hong et al. (2025) draws on postcolonial hybridity to explore how South Korean teachers navigate their roles within multicultural education. Hong et al. (2025) frame multicultural classrooms as hybrid spaces where personal and cultural identities, shaped by both national histories and global influences, intersect and sometimes clash. Hong's work is echoed in *bản sắc* of international school teachers (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)).

From postcolonial perspective, identities of local teachers are significant in the field of education research as they play a vital role in reclaiming and revalidating local knowledge systems (Smith, 2021; Dei, 2000). Consequently, teacher identity functions as a potential site of resistance against epistemic injustice (Alcoff, 2007; Andreotti, 2011). In the context of education reform driven by global agendas, teacher identity directly shapes how reforms are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in practice (Liu and Trent, 2023; Sriprakash, 2011). For instance, Sriprakash (2011) underscores how local teachers in India reinterpret and implement reform agendas through the lens of local relationships, expectations, and values, thereby reaffirming the centrality of identity in education reforms. Liu and Trent (2023), in their empirical study on Chinese teachers, identified three distinct trajectories of teacher identity – thriving, surviving, and exclusion – reflecting varying responses to reform-driven challenges. Han (2020) highlights that reforms in China, driven by social transformation and globalisation, have created new expectations for teachers. This leads to conflicts and tensions as teachers navigate multiple social demands (Ibid.). In such a situation, teachers undergo the process of self-discovery as they adapt to new expectations in the changing landscape (Ibid.). Similarly, Huang and Asghar (2018), in their study of science education reform in Taiwan, demonstrate how Confucian traditions intersect with reform discourses, creating friction in the adoption of learner-centred and constructivist pedagogies. A common thread running through these studies is that educational reforms in the East have increasingly adopted Western epistemologies, illustrating the complex negotiation processes teachers undertake as they reconcile reforms with local

cultural tradition and epistemologies. In the context of Vietnam's education reform, interactions between the Vietnamese local traditions and Western epistemologies may influence how teachers perceive themselves. This thesis takes this interplay as the central lens for examining bản sắc.

Drawing from this section, the next section discusses Vietnam is a postcolonial nation and the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles in the context of education reform in Vietnam.

4.4 Postcolonial Vietnam and the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles

While the history of resistance wars against colonial forces positions Vietnam as a postcolonial site, Vietnam's colonial legacies and ideological influences are multifaceted and unique to the country. Vietnam experienced Chinese influence, French colonialism, American intervention, and post-1975 Soviet-aligned socialism (Phan, 2010). Notably, Vietnamese resistance to colonial domination was particularly strong and ideologically unified under the banner of national independence and socialism (Khanh and Trang, 2023; Lap, 2018). This resistance is evident in the post-independence reconstruction of the education system, where Vietnamese is retained as the national language (Phan Le Ha, 2024). Furthermore, public education is rooted in Ho Chi Minh's ideologies, which were developed from Marxist-Leninist ideology (Cam Lien and Long, 2021; Lap, 2018) rather than a liberal-colonial framework. As such, bản sắc cannot be fully understood solely through the binary of West versus non-West. While concepts like double consciousness (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015, 2019) help frame diasporic experiences, Vietnam's identity negotiations are shaped by a layered interplay of colonial legacies, collectivist traditions, socialist nation-building, and neoliberal capitalist influences.

Neoliberal capitalist principles, often prominent in Western countries such as Western Europe and the United State (LaMothe, 2016), encompass a set of economic and political practices that emphasise the role of free markets, individual choice, and limited government intervention as the primary drivers of economic and social progress (Harvey, 2005). Policies in this sphere typically encompass the elimination of trade barriers, deregulation, and the promotion of private enterprise to diminish governmental involvement in the economy (Ibid.) Neoliberal capitalism also promotes the privatisation of public assets and services, positing that the private sector manages resources more efficiently than government entities (McChesney, 2001). This emphasis may result in diminished state participation in social welfare initiatives, reallocating responsibility to individuals and promoting competition rather than collective welfare (Brown, 2015). Notably, neoliberal capitalism advocates for globalisation to enhance market expansion, facilitating the unrestricted movement of goods, services, and capital across borders (Stiglitz, 2017).

In education, neoliberal capitalist principles emphasise market-oriented values, privatisation, and economic competition (Peters and Tesar, 2017; Hastings, 2019). It conceptualises education as a tradable commodity, fostering competition among educational institutions to enhance quality and

efficiency. This encompasses private schools, charter schools, and the outsourcing of services such as transportation, cafeteria management, and curriculum development (Lipman, 2004). Moreover, education is recognised as an investment in human capital, focusing on skills training to improve productivity and economic competitiveness (Olssen and Peters, 2005; World Bank, 2020a; OECD, 2024). While neoliberal capitalism is not rooted in Vietnamese collectivism and socialism and likely to originate from the West (LaMothe, 2016), this thesis does not treat neoliberal capitalist principles as parts of “Western influences”. Instead, they are viewed as a set of structural forces that intersect with but are not reducible to “Western influences” in the cultural sense.

Vietnam’s education reform is steering schools toward privatisation, even in the public sector, aligning with neoliberal capitalism and World Bank’s Education Strategy 2020 (World Bank, 2020b). For example, recent policies allow public schools to opt for financial autonomy while still operating in the public sector (Ministry of Finance, 2022). Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP encourages the establishment of international schools in the non-public sector. These shifts reflect Rizvi and Lingard’s (2010) argument that global education policies commodify education by transforming schools and degrees into products to be bought and sold, prioritising profitability over accessibility. Similarly, Ball (2012) and Klees (2020) emphasises the increasing trend of neoliberal education reforms globally, in which education provision has been shifting from public to private entities. Such a shift can risk deepening socioeconomic divides by tying access to quality education to financial capacity. Wealthy families in Vietnam increasingly invest in privatised education while criticising public schools for overcrowding, outdated methods, inadequate facilities and out-of-date teaching/learning methods which no longer meet their demands (Bui, 2014). They prioritise prestigious private institutions that offer English proficiency, internationally recognised qualifications, and cosmopolitan capitals – skills deemed essential for success in a globalised neoliberal economy (McKay et al., 2012; Bright, 2015). This notion is evident in international schools, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Moreover, Vietnam’s education reform reflects the growing influence of international organisations in shaping the global agendas on policies, such as the World Bank’s Human Capital Project (2020a), World Bank’s Learning for All (2020b), OECD’s Human Capital at work (2024), and UNESCO’s SDG 4b (2019) (see [Chapter 2, section 2.2](#)). These policies have been promoted as best practices which ‘developing’ countries have increasingly adopted, which may risk marginalising local epistemologies and traditional understandings of education (Nordtveit, 2010; Ball, 2012; Spring, 2008; Batra, 2020; Rasiah, 2022; You, 2019). Rasiah (2022) addresses the Eurocentrism in global education policies and advocates for a decolonising approach to knowledge in global education. Rizvi and Lingard (2006) argue that global agendas often prioritise market efficiency over equity, reframing education as a tool for human capital development. This could exacerbate global inequalities, signifying neocolonial structures where economic power dictates educational access (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). As Nguyen et al. (2009) asserts, a number of postcolonial countries, including

Vietnam, have aligned their education with the global agendas which are rooted in Western epistemology, frequently to the detriment of local knowledge systems and educational practices. Thus, the pressure to align the national education with the international standards can marginalise the voices of the Vietnamese population, reinforcing hegemony power relations in knowledge production and policy making. Moreover, when Eastern countries with strong nationalism (e.g., China, South Korea) implement education reform driven by global agendas, their education landscapes experience a complex interaction among cosmopolitanism, neoliberalism, and nationalism (Smith et al., 2024). Smith et al. (2024) argue that these interactions can lead to a cultural hybridity called cosmopolitan nationalism. The concept of cosmopolitan nationalism is further discussed in [Chapter 5](#) in relation to international schools.

4.5 Decolonial thoughts of the thesis

So far, this chapter has discussed central themes of postcolonial theory and their relevance to the thesis. However, some postcolonial works (e.g., Said, 1995; Rizvi and Lingard, 2006, 2010) often draw from philosophies rooted in Western modernity such as Michel Foucault (e.g., the concept of knowledge and power, order of discourse) and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., habitus, social reproduction, discursive relations). While these postcolonial theorists do not adopt Foucault and Bourdieu's philosophies uncritically, it is important to acknowledge the Eurocentrism underlying in these works. Given my positionality as a Vietnamese researcher, critically acknowledging the Eurocentrism embedded in the Western materials I engage with enables the thesis to approach these theoretical materials with caution and reflexivity.

Foucault's deep analysis of institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, asylums) and the development of the modern state as well as relationship between power and knowledge (1971, 1995) is useful in discussion on how colonial power has constructed knowledge of the "non-West". However, Foucault did not speak of colonialism nor interrogate how European modernity was built through imperialism. This omission is concerning given the centrality of colonialism to the Western modernity. Foucault's framework, as noted by Mignolo (2011) and Maldonado-Torres (2007), operates within the logic of modernity, thereby overlooking the "coloniality of power" – the notion that colonial domination persists in the postcolonial world. Thus, Foucault's philosophies often universalise European epistemology while neglecting European roots in imperialism.

As Foucault's work is grounded in Western secular epistemology, emphasising rationality, discourse, and institutional power, it is problematic for decolonial thinking because it fails to acknowledge non-Western ways of knowing. Brent Edwards (2025) refers to this problem as onto-epistemic occlusion. Drawing from Foucault's, Said's *Orientalism* (2014) focuses primarily on elite Western discourses while neglecting the voices of the marginalised and oppressed groups within colonised societies (Spivak, 2004). Thus, *Orientalism* has been critiqued for its focus on rigid binaries

(West and non-West), while colonial encounters often led to the mixing and blending of identities, cultures, and power relations (Bhabha, 1994). Santos (2015) critiques Western critical theory, including Foucault's, for failing to make space for "epistemologies of the South". Thus, Foucault's works may be seen as liberating in Western contexts, but for many colonised peoples, the imposition of Western epistemology is perhaps what erased their own truths and cosmologies. Furthermore, despite the nuanced understanding of power as diffuse and productive in Foucault's work, his focus on micro-power and discourse analysis seems to suggest that power is omnipresent and inescapable (Lewis, 2017).

Similarly, Bourdieu's concepts (e.g., cultural capital, discursive relation, and legitimate knowledge) are crucial for comprehending the social world. However, his analysis of social reproduction is often not transformative. The notion of habitus and cultural reproduction, although useful in explaining how inequality is reproduced unconsciously through cultural dispositions, fail to address resistance. Meanwhile, resistance, epistemic disobedience, and subjugated knowledge reclaiming are significant for decolonial thinking (Mignolo, 2009; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

In the context of global education policies, Bourdieu's works do not facilitate decolonial thoughts as they depict the social order as culturally homogeneous, without interrogating which knowledge is deemed legitimate (Brent Edwards, 2025). Brent Edwards further suggests that this may be due to Bourdieu's grounding of his theory in the study of Catholicism, a theological framework that cannot recognise the validity of other cosmologies (Ibid.). When applied to the Vietnamese context, Bourdieu's framework appears foreign to the country's Confucian roots whose focus is not about seeking for a universal "truth".

Therefore, while studies on global education policies presented in section 4.4 are valid, they largely operate within a postcolonial rather than a decolonial framework (Brent Edwards, 2025), which could pose epistemic problems. As Brent Edwards (2025) points out, postcolonial theory primarily focuses on the cultural, social, political-economic, and experiential consequences of colonialism, but often remains embedded in Western modernity. Meanwhile, decolonial approaches seek to comprehend and transcend the onto-epistemic roots of modernity and colonialism (Ibid.). Studies on global education policies like Rizvi and Lingard (2010) emphasise the significance of power in the construction and justification of knowledge claims, critical approaches, including (neo)Marxism, postmodernism, and post-structuralism. It means, these critiques continue to function within or merely respond to modernity without interrogating or transcending its onto-epistemic foundations (Brent Edward, 2025). As Brent Edwards (2025) notes, despite "critical approaches", many studies on global education policies remain confined to examining the colonial past, present, and postcolonial aspirations, while overlooking precolonial histories, non-Western perspectives, and diverse ontological objectives. Consequently, even postcolonial "critical" perspectives on global education policies perpetuate the issues associated with modernity/coloniality (Ibid.). As mentioned subsection 4.3.2, Western modernity is rooted in its colonial history which established a hierarchy of

existence and produced the universal Western onto-epistemology at the cost of the non-West. Therefore, if postcolonial discourses continue to operate within this framework, then what is often framed as decolonial thought risks becoming a “*Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism*” (Brent Edwards, 2025, p.7).

When discussing the research findings in [Chapter 8](#) and [9](#), this thesis references Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and linguistic capital (1986, 1991), as well as Foucault’s notions of subjectification, self-configuration, and disciplinary power (1971, 1978, 1982). This might come across as ironic for a study grounded in decolonial thought to engage with French philosophers, given French colonial history in Vietnam. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that during over a hundred years under French influences, aspects of French modernity, ways of thinking and living has left lasting imprints on Vietnamese society (Đặng, 2018). One of the evident examples is the transformation of the Vietnamese written language, as discussed in [subsection 4.3.1](#). Thus, certain concepts of French philosophers may hold analytical relevance. Nonetheless, this thesis maintains a critical stance, recognising the Eurocentric assumption that often underlie postcolonial scholarship and the works of Bourdieu and Foucault. In this thesis, Western materials are interpreted reflexively and cautiously through engagement with Vietnamese societal organisations. When doing so, how these ideas interact with Vietnamese ways of thinking and living are highlighted, where relevant. In its decolonial thoughts, this thesis seeks to avoid falling into what Brent Edwards (2025, p.7) terms a “*Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism*”.

At the same time, it is crucial for the thesis to engage with Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems, even when these are entangled with and influenced by modernity in some or many ways (Brent Edwards, 2025; Đặng, 2018). Therefore, in the conceptual framework of bản sắc, this study employs the work of Asian, Latin-American, and Vietnamese scholars like Markus and Kitayama (1998), Ortega (2001, 2016), and Phan (2010) (see [Chapter 6](#)). As Smith (2021) emphasises, decolonisation must involve reclaiming, valuing, and revitalising indigenous worldviews, not simply understanding how they are marginalised within colonial structures.

However, while (re)claiming Vietnamese epistemology is crucial when studying bản sắc, the aim is not to purify knowledge or reject Western epistemologies completely. Instead, this thesis engages with Vietnamese cultural complexity as a foundation for developing an onto-epistemic perspective that starts from a non-modern standpoint. Such approach echoes Phan’s (2010) concept of stability of Vietnamese cultural identity amidst global influences. By doing so, this study allows for the “ecologies of knowledge” (Santos, 2015) that challenges universalism while remaining rooted in local realities. As Brent Edwards (2025) said “*the world may be connected politically, economically, socially, and topologically, but this does not mean that, subjectively, each person is living within a single universalism*” (p.15).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed postcolonial theory which informs the decolonial approach of this thesis, the researcher's positionality, and lays the foundations for discussion in subsequent chapters. The key takeaways from this chapter are:

- Language is central to postcolonial theory, examining how colonial languages have been used to represent colonised peoples in ways that serve colonisers' interests (Spivak, 2004; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Language is therefore a significant focus of this thesis, both in terms of empirical analysis and methodological approach. The thesis uses of Vietnamese terms such as *bản sắc*, alongside other culturally embedded concepts (see [Chapter 7](#)) as a way to amplify Vietnamese voices and foster the pluralism of knowledge. However, the choice to write in English reflects the researcher's dilemma. Writing in English is a pragmatic decision to gain international recognition and academic legitimacy; yet it also risks reinforcing the linguistic hegemony that this thesis seeks to challenge. This tension reveals the complex positionality of the researcher in the effort to (re)claim Vietnamese epistemology.
- The West and non-West concept does not indicate geographical location but is rooted in colonial power (Young, 2016). To avoid reinforcing these binaries, this thesis approaches the "West" from a Vietnamese perspective, referring "Western influences" to sets of cultural norms, values, and epistemology not grounded in Vietnamese traditions (i.e., collectivist, socialist).
- Finally, this chapter has discussed the Eurocentrism underlying some postcolonial works and addresses the coloniality/modernity in philosophies of Foucault and Bourdieu. This thesis, while referencing Bourdieu and Foucault, these thinkers are not central in the theoretical framework. However, the majority of postcolonial scholarships referenced in this thesis draws from these philosophers. Acknowledging this, the thesis recognises the possible colonial entanglements of Western research and interprets them critically. At the same time, this study foregrounds Vietnamese epistemologies and integrates perspectives from Asian, Latin-American, and Vietnamese scholars (e.g., Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Ortega, 2001, 2016; Phan, 2010) to conceptualise *bản sắc*. Rather than rejecting Western knowledge entirely, the thesis embraces epistemic pluralism, resisting universalism while fostering an "ecology of knowledge" (Santos, 2015; Smith, 2021; Brent Edwards, 2025). The theoretical framework is discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

Building on the discussion in this chapter, next chapter explores the politics of international schools and international school teachers from the postcolonial perspective.

Chapter 5: The Politics of International Schools and Teachers' Identity

5.1 Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam has witnessed a rapid growth of international schools, particularly since the enactment of Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP. As of 2024, there are 120 international schools across the country, with student enrolment recorded at 66,022 in 2018 (Hung, 2024; BMI GlobalEd, 2019). This growth reflects not only the increasing demand from local affluent families but also the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles. This chapter examines the underpinning ideologies of international schools and international school teachers through a postcolonial lens. Given the limited number of studies focusing specifically on Vietnam, the chapter draws on research across Asian countries and highlights the relevance to the Vietnamese context.

The chapter is structured into six sections. [Section 5.2](#) unpacks the various definitions and the “international” nature of international schools. [Section 5.3](#) discusses the growth of international schools worldwide and in Vietnam. [Section 5.4](#) discusses neoliberal capitalist principles associated with international schools. [Section 5.5](#) engages with the concepts of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan capital, often associated with international schools, and introduces the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism to offer a more nuanced understanding of international school politics in Vietnam and its changing nature. [Section 5.6](#) challenges dominant assumptions around social class in existing literature, interrogating Western social class frameworks and their application to a socialist country like Vietnam. Finally, [section 5.7](#) reviews literature on teachers at international schools, including expatriate and local teachers.

The chapter concludes by summarising the key takeaways and highlighting the Vietnamese contexts. By examining the politics of international schools and their teachers through the postcolonial lens, the significance of decolonial approach of the thesis is highlighted. Thus, throughout the chapter, a decolonial stance is retained when engaging with existing literature, addressing both epistemological tensions and research gaps. In doing so, the chapter offers a more contextual-conscious and nuanced understanding of international schools in Vietnam.

5.2 What are international schools?

Despite growing field of research on international schools, the concept of international schools has remained lacking universal definitions. The ISC Research defines an international school as one that provides a curriculum, either wholly or partially in English, outside of the national curriculum of the host country (iscresearch.com). However, its definition has been critiqued for its lack of clarity (Bunnell et al., 2016; Hayden and Thompson, 2008). Scholars have proposed multiple frameworks and criteria to define and categorise international schools, reflecting their diverse origins,

functions, and stakeholder expectations. This section explores key scholarly perspectives and typologies that have shaped the evolving understanding of what constitutes an international school.

Hayden and Thompson (2013) classify international schools into three types: Type A – Traditional, Type B – Ideological, and Type C – Non-traditional. Type A schools are defined as those created to provide education for children of globally mobile parents and is characterised by a significant cultural diversity among its student body (Hayden and Thompson, 2013; Bunnell et al., 2016). These schools are typically funded privately, with parents covering fees, yet they do not operate on a for-profit basis. The predominant student population in Type A schools consists of expatriates, primarily from Western nations, rather than local residents, with English serving as the primary medium of communication (Brummitt and Keeling, 2013). Type A schools have been associated with the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) (Bunnell et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Type B – Ideological international schools – are dedicated to education for global peace and/or the philosophy of Kurt Hahn (Veevers and Pete, 2011 as cited in Bunnell et al., 2016), and their numbers are relatively limited. The core principle of Type B schools is international mindedness; these institutions aim to incorporate a global perspective into their curriculum, exemplified by the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. Type C – Non-traditional are emerging international schools existing outside of Type A and B. These schools witness rapid growth in Asian countries and exhibit various characteristics. A prominent characteristic of Type C schools is their private ownership, with operations aimed at generating profit for the owners (Bunnell et al., 2016). While these schools may present themselves as international, their student populations are often composed almost entirely of nationals of the host country. Hayden and Thompson (2013) refer to this demographic as the “*aspirational middle class*,” (p.7) whose families are willing to pay high fees for what is perceived as a premium, globally oriented education. The proliferation of Type C schools is largely driven by market demand rather than by traditional international school missions (Bunnell et al., 2016).

In addition to this typology, other scholars have based on various criteria to define international schools, such as the language of instruction, curriculum, governance, stakeholders, cultural education, access, and tuition fees (Hayden and Thompson, 2008; Resnik, 2012a; MacDonald, 2006; Bunnell, 2008a). Hayden and Thompson (2008) identified four primary dimensions for understanding international schools: curriculum, student body, staff, and governance. In terms of curriculum, international schools typically offer curricula that are recognised globally rather than the curriculum of the host country where the school is situated. Hayden and Thompson (2008) list commonly adopted programmes such as national systems adapted for international contexts, the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), Advanced Placement (AP), the French Baccalauréat Option Internationale, the European Baccalaureate, and various International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes including the Diploma Programme (IBDP), Middle Years Programme (MYP), and Primary Years Programme (PYP), as well as the International Primary

Curriculum (IPC) and the Cambridge International Primary Programme (CIPP). These curricula often emphasise the development of global citizenship, aiming to foster awareness of global issues, intercultural competence, and critical thinking skills in students (Ibid.). According to Burnell (2008b), International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) is the most common programme at international schools.

The language of instruction is often English, regardless of the host country's primary language (Bunnell, 2008a). Although most international schools use English as the language of instruction, it is not the main feature of international schools since it doesn't distinguish these schools from national schools in some countries (Hayden and Thompson, 2008). In terms of student demographics, many international schools are originally established for the children of expatriates, diplomats, or international business professionals. However, they increasingly attract children of affluent host country families seeking global opportunities or university pathways outside their home country (Hayden, 2006). This diverse demographic creates a culturally varied student body, which promotes intercultural understanding but also raises questions about the role of these schools within the local education ecosystem. The diversity among students is often mirrored in the teaching staff, which includes both expatriate and local teachers (Hayden and Thompson, 2008). Teachers in international schools typically have experience with or training in international curricula. This multicultural teaching body brings a range of pedagogical approaches and cultural perspectives, but may also lead to challenges concerning classroom management, expectations around teaching practices, and leadership approaches (Hayden and Thompson, 2008; Bunnell, 2014).

Governance structures in international schools vary widely. Schools may be operated by private owners, managed by non-profit foundations, linked to embassies, or governed by international school chains. These structures influence not only the institutional priorities and fees charged but also the degree to which a school aligns with or diverges from the local educational context (MacDonald, 2006). Due to the variety of governance models, tuition fees can be different from school to school. However, tuition at international schools is often high, given the costs of international accreditation, hiring expatriate teachers, and maintaining facilities (Ibid.). Given the tuition fees, many international schools primarily serve wealthier expatriate or local families, raising questions about accessibility and equality in educational opportunities (MacKenzie, 2010).

Some scholars also classify international schools based on the school's director board, school size, and education levels. According to Terwilliger (1972), members of the board of directors of international schools often reflect the demographics of the student group they serve, which includes both native-born and international students. Blandford and Shaw (2004) point out that an international school can be a single-sex or mixed school. They can be multi-levelled (combination of kindergarten, primary, secondary) or single level. The organisation of these learning levels can vary from school to school. Their enrolment numbers also vary significantly, from small schools with fewer than 50 students to large institutions serving over 4,000 students (Ibid.).

The nature of international schools has been associated with “being international” (Bunnell et al., 2016; Tanu, 2018). From an institutional legitimacy perspective, Bunnell et al. (2016) argue that the international status of schools can be understood through three forms of legitimacy: normative, cognitive, and pragmatic. Normative legitimacy refers to the extent to which a school aligns with globally accepted educational norms and values, such as adopting international curricula or progressive pedagogical approaches (Ibid.). Cognitive legitimacy involves alignment with societal and cultural expectations of what an international school represents, including features such as a diverse student body, multilingual education, and internationally trained staff (Ibid.). Pragmatic legitimacy reflects a school’s ability to meet the immediate and practical needs of stakeholders, such as providing educational continuity for mobile families or ensuring access to globally recognised qualifications (Ibid.). While these forms of legitimacy enhance a school’s reputation and market appeal, they also suggest that the label “international” can be strategically employed to attract certain clientele. In some cases, the branding may not reflect a genuine commitment to inclusive, globally diverse educational practices (Ibid.).

Despite the various frameworks and definitions proposed in the literature, “international” schools remain ambiguous and open to broad interpretation. According to Bunnell (2014), any school may claim to be “international” if they so see fit, regardless of whether it meets any specific criteria. One feature that appears to be universal in the definition of international schools is that these schools offer an alternative education to the local national education system (MacKenzie, 2010). However, the diversity within the sector continues to challenge efforts to define international schools in a singular or universally applicable way.

In Vietnam, international schools often fall into two main categories: those that implement the whole curriculum of a foreign country and those that use an integrated programme (with the combination of foreign curriculum and Vietnamese National Curriculum), also known as bilingual international schools (Bui, 2014). Research suggests that bilingual international schools – type C international schools in Hayden and Thompson’s (2013) typology – dominate the landscape in Vietnam (Kim and Mobrand, 2019). In policy documents, international schools are termed as “foreign-invested schools” which are defined as schools with foreign investment (Vietnamese Government, 2018). These schools operate in the non-public sectors and are different from Vietnamese private schools. The term “international schools” in Vietnam’s education landscape is problematic as many private schools use the term “international” in their brand name without having foreign investment (Communist Party Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2019). According to Peng (2024), international schools in Vietnam are often in a “grey area” in Vietnamese education landscape. This is because these schools are often caught in between Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training’s jurisdiction and their own countries’ education policy (Ibid.). This situation echoes Bunnell’s (2014) claim about the ambiguity of the term “international”. In this thesis, international schools are understood as schools with foreign investment, provide general education (including

Primary, Lower-secondary, and Upper-secondary level), and operate within the non-public sector. Moreover, due to the lack of universal definitions for international schools in policies and in existing literature, the thesis also explores how teachers define these schools (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)).

5.3 The growth of international schools

The expansion of international schools has been accelerating worldwide, driven by economic progress, the needs of expatriates, and local families' aspirations for a globally focused education (ISC Research, 2025b). As of January 2025, there were 14,833 K-12 international schools globally, of which 58% are in Asian countries (Ibid.). Globally, international schools currently employ 713,539 teachers while the total number of students attending international schools is 7.4 million, of which the majority are local students (Ibid.). From 2015 to 2025, the international school industry worldwide has grown by 73% in total fee incomes with a total \$67.3 billions in 2025 (Ibid.). ISC Research (2023) reported a 59.6% increase in international schools and a 62.4% rise in student enrolment across Asia from 2013 to 2023. In Southeast Asia, enrolment grew by 23% between 2018 and 2023, with the number of international schools rising from 1,600 to 1,940 between 2022 and 2023 (Ibid.).

In Vietnam, between 2020 and 2025, there is a 24% rise in the number of international schools, with student enrolment up by 28% and revenue by 48% (ISC Research, 2025a). As of 2024, Vietnam has over 120 international schools, spanning from kindergarten to high school (Hung, 2024). This growth reflects not only rising demand among wealthy families but also a broader transformation in how values of international education is perceived in Vietnam (GSE, 2025).

The expansion of international schools in Asian countries is frequently attributed to the growing interest among local families in international education. A study on international schools in China highlights that this growth is largely driven by parental perceptions and expectations (Wright, 2024). There was a common belief among these families that sending their children to an international school would give them advantages in the job market (Ibid.). Moreover, international schools were portrayed by local parents as a means to escape the shortcomings of public education (Ibid.). These beliefs are echoed in the Vietnamese context, where families have turned to international schools due to dissatisfaction with the national education system (Bui, 2014). For local families, international schools are seen as providing more liberal and student-centred learning environments where learners are encouraged to freely express themselves, explore their hobbies, and develop their unique skills (Wright, 2024). Parents often believe education at international schools to be more globally aligned, fostering multilingual proficiency, international mindset, cultural adaptability, preparing students for opportunities abroad (Ibid.).

According to ISC Research (2023), many parents would prefer their children to attend schools that take a more inquiry-based approach to learning, one that better equips them for success in further education and the workforce. School selection is also shaped by curriculum direction, academic

credentials, and future pathways (Ibid.). Factors such as family background, country prestige, and relocation ease also influence choices (Ibid.). In Southeast Asia, the ability of local families to afford tuition fees remains a central factor in shaping demand. Meanwhile, expatriate families who relocate to these regions continue to contribute significantly to the growing demands for international schools (Ibid.).

Despite the global expansion of international schools, including in Vietnam, research on Vietnamese international schools remains limited, particularly regarding Vietnamese teachers' identities. This is one of the gaps this thesis attempts to address.

5.4 The perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), neoliberal capitalist principles in education emphasise economic focus, such as market-oriented values, privatisation, commodification, and economic competition. These principles are reflected in international schools in Vietnam. In 2018 alone, the year Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP was enacted, international schools generated approximately \$633.9 million in tuition fee income nationally (BMI GlobalEd, 2019). The growth of international schools also corresponds with rising demand from Vietnamese families and policy changes that relaxed restrictions on the number of local student enrolment in these schools (Vietnamese Government, 2018; GSE, 2025; Bright and Poole, 2025). In particular, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP increased the percentage of Vietnamese student enrolment at international schools from 10% to 50% (Vietnamese Government, 2018). Lee et al. (2021), in their research in Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, echo the same notion. They argue that such policy relaxations/deregulation have accelerated international school expansion, placing these schools at the forefront of education privatisation and marketisation (Ibid.), echoing neoliberal capitalist principles.

Research further suggests that the growth of international schools, particularly in Asian countries, is shaped by broader neoliberal education policies promoted by international organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank (Resnik, 2012b). These policies emphasise competition among schools, parental choice, performance accountability, and public budget reductions (Ibid.). According to Song (2013) – a study on international schools in South Korea, consumer choice serves as a valid rationale for the introduction of international schools into the local education market, a stance endorsed by the government as a basis for its policy decision and for enhancing consumer-centred competitiveness within its overarching education policy (Ibid.). Similarly, in China, education at international schools is framed as an ultimate consumer product (Cao, 2022). In Vietnam, the growth in international schools due to local parents' demands (GSE, 2025; Bright and Poole, 2025) signifies that education at international schools is perceived as a “choice” outside of public education (Bui, 2014). Tikly (2004), however, argues that the rhetoric of “choice” is strategically employed to legitimise the presence of international schools, often appealing to notions of quality and global

competitiveness. As policies promote competition within the education landscape, where schools compete for enrolment, prestige, and profit, consumer culture is reinforced (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). This notion is confirmed by international school teachers in this research (see [Chapter 9, section 9.3.2](#)).

Moreover, international schools have increasingly been viewed as an industry (Hammer, 2021). MacDonald (2006) posits international education as a burgeoning industry marked by the growing marketisation of schooling, an increasingly business-oriented practice. Kim and Mobrand (2019) argue that policy pushes for international schools in Asian countries have allowed the gradual and often unnoticed infiltration of markets into national education systems. They further contend that this mode of market does not emerge through explicit endorsements of “choice” by families or policymakers, nor is it reflected in public discourse that celebrates educational choice (Ibid.). According to Kim and Mobrand (2019), this type of market is a form of “stealth” market creation – one that operates beneath the surface and carries significant implications for social inequality, citizenship, and national identity of the local populations.

Research has further pointed out that the expansion of international schools has reshaped educational landscapes, prompting critical concerns about the entrenchment of neoliberal capitalist principles and their implications for cultural hierarchy and educational equity in postcolonial societies (Song, 2013; Rizvi, 2009a; Kim and Mobrand, 2019). Understanding the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism within Vietnam’s broader education landscape, and international schools in particular, enables this research to examine the interplay between Vietnam’s socialism and neoliberal capitalism in shaping teachers’ bản sắc. The next section discusses cosmopolitanism that is often characterised international schools and the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism.

5.5 Cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan capitals

The concept of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan capitals have been often argued or assumed to be characteristics of international schools. Given that Vietnam is a country with strong nationalism (Salomon and Ket, 2007; Khanh and Trang, 2023), the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism is discussed to provide a nuanced understanding of international schools’ politics in postcolonial countries and its changing nature.

Cosmopolitanism, though loosely defined, is commonly understood as an orientation toward global values and a conception of the world as a single entity (Calhoun, 2008; Young, 2023). Calhoun (2008) describes cosmopolitanism as one’s ability to understand, respect, and feel comfortable with cultural diversity. In education, cosmopolitanism is reflected in cross-national curricula alignment, initiatives for global citizenship education, and the promotion of cosmopolitan learning and citizenship (Wright and Huang, 2025). These practices may stem from a demand to recognise a common humanity or more instrumentally preparing students for participation in a globalised

workforce in the global economy (Ibid.). Research often posits international school as a site that promotes cosmopolitanism through the teaching of international curricula and global citizenship (Peterson, 2011). However, global citizenship education at international schools prioritises skills including critical thinking, cultural awareness, and language proficiency that are consistent with Western neoliberal values (Andreotti, 2011; Doherty, 2009). This approach may unintentionally establish a one-sided interaction, prompting students from various cultural backgrounds to align with Western values, thereby diminishing the diversity of global perspectives. Therefore, cosmopolitanism at international schools is frequently reserved for those whose cultural dispositions mirror Western ideals (Peterson, 2011), thereby marginalising local knowledge systems and reinforcing cultural hierarchies rooted in colonial discourse (Rizvi, 2009b).

If cosmopolitanism is an ideal, cosmopolitan capital is an instrument to achieve cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan capital refers to the social, cultural, and linguistic (English) competencies aligned with global values (Weenink, 2008; Tanu, 2018). At international schools, cosmopolitan capitals enhance students' global mobility, cultural adaptability, competitiveness in international environments, and promote the identity of "being international" (Tanu, 2018; Resnik, 2012a; Hayden and Thompson, 2013). The concept of cosmopolitan capitals aligns with the global agendas, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2019).

However, the global education agendas, the concept of cosmopolitanism, and cosmopolitan capitals often reflect a Eurocentric worldview. Cosmopolitan capital is a concept extended from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, which refers to cultural resources individuals accumulate to gain social mobility within dominant power structures. This concept has been useful for understanding the globalised attitudes that are developed at international schools, but its epistemological grounds require a closer investigation. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), Bourdieu's philosophies do not facilitate decolonial thoughts as they are formed on the basis on Western modernity/coloniality. From a decolonial perspective, the promotion cosmopolitan capital in postcolonial country risks reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowledge positioning Western norms as universal indicators of success. Studies on international schools from a postcolonial lens echoes the same concern. Tanu (2018), in a study on an international school in Indonesia, asserts that the ideal of "being international" is typically constructed around Western norms, languages, and cultural dispositions. In this sense, cosmopolitan capitals often position Western education, Western ways of being and knowing as superior; often renders other forms of cultural knowledge invisible or inferior (Tanu, 2018; Rizvi, 2009a; Andreotti, 2011, 2014; Gardner-McTaggart, 2021). Moreover, as the concept cosmopolitan capitals stems from Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital which emphasises the cultural reproduction of the dominant class in capitalist societies. This social-class framework stands in contrast with how Vietnamese socialism understand social class, which may cause tension in the national education landscape.

Recently, a growing body of research addresses the rise of nationalism in the globalised context and examine international schools through the lens of cosmopolitan nationalism, demonstrating an evolving nature of international schools (Wright et al., 2022; Young, 2023; Wright and Huang, 2025). Given that Vietnam is a country with strong nationalism (Salomon and Ket, 2007; Khanh and Trang, 2023), the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism is discussed to provide a nuanced understanding of international schools' politics and its changing nature. As an analytical tool, cosmopolitan nationalism highlights the intersection of global and national imperatives in education (Maxwell et al., 2020). Cosmopolitan nationalism pertains to the nation's consciousness and connection with the global, but it must occur within the parameters of the local framework (Ibid.). This approach acknowledges how policymakers are reacting to increased globalisation in shaping the objectives and approaches of education, while simultaneously emphasising the nation's significance in their conception of what education is for (Wright and Huang, 2025). This perspective frames education as simultaneously oriented toward global integration and national development (Wright and Huang, 2025; Bright and Poole, 2025). In their empirical study on international schools in China, Wright and Huang (2025) demonstrate how schools navigate both cosmopolitan and nationalist agendas in policy, curricula, and pedagogical approach. This process often shifts away from Western influences to move toward nationally grounded approaches to education at international schools (Ibid.). Similarly, Young (2023), in a study on international schools in China, indicates that those schools may fail to cultivate the level of global connectedness which cosmopolitanism aims for, demonstrating cosmopolitan nationalism.

Bright and Poole (2025), in a study on international schools in Vietnam, address the interplay between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. The study argues that international schools in Vietnam can be understood as sites of cosmopolitan nationalism, aligning with the government's vision of a distinct private education sector (Ibid.). This sector aims to balance national education goals prioritising socialisation, citizenship formation, and the preservation of national identity with the globalised education. Bright and Poole (2025) further contend that cosmopolitan nationalism acknowledges the inherent tensions and potential contradictions between promoting cosmopolitan ideals while also upholding national education priorities, including a continued emphasis on socialism grounded in Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's ideology as central to shaping Vietnamese national identity.

In this thesis, the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism offers analytical potential for examining the interplay between neoliberal capitalist principles and Vietnamese socialism within the educational landscape. However, given the conflict nature between cosmopolitanism and nationalism as well as the epistemological imbalance often associated with cosmopolitanism, the thesis remains critical in its decolonial approach when incorporating this concept in the interpretation of research findings. This critical stance acknowledges that *"the juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and*

nationalism appears to construct an oxymoron, or paradoxical identity” (Wright et al., 2022, p.247), raising questions about the implications of such juxtaposition on bản sắc of Vietnamese teachers.

5.6 Rethinking social class assumption

As discussed in [Section 5.4](#), the growth of international schools reflects an increase in “choices” for local families to seek for an alternative outside of the host country’s public education. However, the majority of international schools operate in the private sector (Wright, 2024), or the non-public sector in the Vietnamese context, charging tuition fees that remain beyond the financial reach of most local families (Wright, 2024). For example, tuition fees at international schools in Vietnam range from approximately 200 to 900 million VND (\$7000 to \$35,500 annually) (GSE, 2025; Thanh Hang, 2024) while the average incomes per capita is 7.7 million VND (approximately \$300) per month in 2024 (General Statistic Office of Vietnam, 2025). Thus, despite the evidently increased accessibility, international schools continue to represent an exclusive segment of the education landscape (Wright, 2024).

Research consistently shows that international schools primarily cater to emerging social class in host countries, identified as emerging middle or upper-middle class (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016), or the emerging aspiring middle class (Bunnell, 2022). This emerging social class is composed of affluent local families willing to afford high tuition fees in exchange for cosmopolitan capitals (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Bunnell, 2022). The reasons behind this exchange vary. Some seek better educational alternatives for their children (Bunnell, 2022), others view international schools as a means of providing positional advantages for their children in the global context (Wright, 2024), or as a response to dissatisfaction with public education systems (Ng, 2012; Bui, 2014). In China, for instance, Wright (2024) highlights that parents at international schools mostly belong to a privileged social class, either the established middle class or the emerging rich class of entrepreneurs. In this sense, international schools have become synonymous with exclusive access to global opportunities, serving as educational enclaves for the affluent (Bunnell et al., 2016). As such, international schools foster a dual-track education system, where only the privileged few can access the symbolic and material benefits associated with internationalised, Western-oriented education (Hayden, 2006; Rizvi, 2009; Chen, 2023; Lee and Wright, 2016).

In Vietnam, the growth of international schools suggests a rise in affluent families able to afford the high tuition fees. This growth, along with the policy change increasing the cap on Vietnamese student enrolment from 10% to 50% (Vietnamese Government, 2018) further indicates that access to international schools has become less exclusive than in the past. However, these schools still serve only a small fraction of the population. For instance, in 2018, 66,022 K–12 students were enrolled in international schools in Vietnam (BMI GlobalEd, 2019) while the national K-12 student population was 15 million (Nguyen, 2020). This stark contrast underscores that access to education at

international schools still remains somewhat exclusive. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that this exclusivity is complex and cannot be solely attributed to social class. When selecting international schools, Vietnamese parents prioritise the adaptability of educational curricula and the education quality (The Saigon Times, 2023). Their objectives for enrolling their children in international schools generally encompass two categories: those intending for their children to pursue education or establish residency overseas, and those ambivalent about their children's academic trajectories yet desiring to equip them thoroughly, particularly in global citizenship competencies to adeptly navigate a constantly changing world (Ibid.). Vietnamese parents' choices suggest an ideological alignment with the values international schools promote. This raises a critical consideration: families who do not enrol their children in international schools, even if financially able, may hold different educational values or place greater trust in public education. Thus, exclusivity may not only reflect financial or socio-economic barriers but also differences in ideological or beliefs in education.

On the one hand, research suggests that international schools function as a mechanism for class (re)production, symbolic distinction, thus potentially reinforcing neocolonial hierarchies (Tikly, 2004; Hayden and Thompson, 2013), and exacerbating educational inequalities and class stratification in host countries (Wright, 2024; Tanu, 2018; Beech et al., 2021; Weenink, 2008). This process may position international school students to be future “winners of globalisation” (Wright, 2024, p.16) while marginalising those in the perceived deficient public education (Ng, 2012; Bui, 2014; Song, 2013). On the other hand, the privileges associated with international schools are not without contradiction. According to Wright (2024), there is a paradox in the “advantages” of international school students in China, as they are often subject to negative stereotypes. Perceived as unworthy of their privileged position, those students are often portrayed as “rich, arrogant, and lazy” (Ibid., p.16). Moreover, these students may be viewed as cultural outsiders who have uncritically embraced Western values, lack national loyalty, and are insufficiently fluent in the local language (Ibid.). While international school students may have better transnational career opportunities (Weenink, 2008; Tanu, 2018; Lee and Wright, 2016), they may face barriers in pursuing careers nationally in the civil service and business sectors (Wright, 2024.). This notion challenges the superiority of Western education and social class (re)production often argued in existing literature (e.g., Hayden, 2006, 2011; Peterson, 2011; Lee and Wright, 2016; Tanu, 2018) and highlights the ambivalent nature of cosmopolitan identity.

Rethinking class assumption in international schools allows this research to avoid uncritically adopting social class frameworks, rooted in Western modernity and neoliberal capitalism, when discussing the national education landscape and its implications of teachers' bản sắc (see [Chapter 10](#)). Instead, this thesis considers Vietnam's socialist class consciousness, enabling a more culturally grounded analysis of the education landscape. When doing so, the engages critically with Vietnam's

socialist framework, particularly Ho Chi Minh's ideologies, and how they have shaped Vietnamese education and teachers' bản sắc.

5.7 Teachers at international schools

As this thesis explores bản sắc (identity) of Vietnamese teachers at public and international schools, it is essential to examine how existing scholarships have addressed teachers' experiences and identities in international schools. While former studies include teachers in their research, they have largely focused on expatriate teachers (e.g., Bright, 2022; Bailey and Cooker, 2019; Poole, 2019, 2020; Tarc and Tarc, 2017). In the recent years, a growing body of research has begun to examine the cultural hierarchies between expatriate and local teachers, often through postcolonial lenses (e.g., Gibson and Bailey, 2023; Gardiner-McTaggart, 2020; Tanu, 2018; Lai et al., 2016). This section critically reviews relevant literature on the identity and experiences of both expatriate and local teachers in international schools, particularly in Asian contexts and Vietnam, and highlights the research gaps. Moreover, since the conceptual framework of bản sắc includes teachers' work environment (see [Chapter 6](#)), engaging with this body of literature allows this research to comprehend Vietnamese teachers' perception of both their local and expatriate colleagues.

Bailey and Cooker (2019), in a study on expatriate teachers in international schools across Asian countries, identify three types of expatriate teachers: Type A are those who have joined the profession for travelling opportunities; Type B refers to those with ideological commitment and international mindedness; and Type C are teachers with strong attachment to the local communities. Bright (2022), in research on expatriate teachers in international schools in Vietnam, found evidence of "accidental travellers", contrasted with type B teachers categorised by Bailey and Cooker (2019). These "accidental travellers" initially pursued teaching as a profession but ended up working abroad more by chance than by deliberate planning (Bright, 2022). Often, though not always, their choice of location was shaped by opportunistic or accidental circumstances (Ibid.).

A common thread in research on expatriate teachers at international schools is cultural experiences. In a case study of international schools in Malaysia, Bailey (2015) found that expatriate teachers often experienced culture shock and cultural uncertainty. These teachers tend to play it safe in their teaching practices and even in their attire, due to uncertainty about what are considered acceptable behaviours within the local culture (Ibid.). Bailey and Cooker (2019) conceptualise expatriate teachers as "Third Culture Teachers", who *"see themselves not as professional teachers in their country of origin or in their country of residence, but as belonging primarily to a third culture of teacher identity – that of the teacher in an international school"* (Ibid., p.135). These teachers do not feel a sense of belonging in the educational system of their home country, and their professional practices and responsibilities as educators are shaped by their time spent teaching abroad (Ibid.). At the same time, they don't align themselves in the local teaching community either (Poole, 2020;

Bailey and Cooker, 2019). According to Poole (2019), in a study on international schools in China, the local traditions are often seen as competing with, and even undermining, the professional beliefs and identities of Western expatriate teachers. Poole (2020) expands on this by introducing the concept of “cross-cultural experiences” as central to expatriate teachers’ identity, especially as they navigate conflicting identities brought about by their domestic and international professional and personal experiences (Ibid.).

However, several studies have revealed an implicit belief among expatriate teachers in the superiority of Western pedagogical approaches. According to Bailey (2015), while these teachers are concerned about the importance of preserving students’ cultural identity at the international school, there is a disparity between how Malaysian students and expatriate teachers understood learning. Expatriate teachers frequently hold the view that Western pedagogical approaches are inherently more effective (Ibid.). Poole (2019) similarly notes that local pedagogical traditions are often perceived as incompatible with expatriate teachers’ educational beliefs, creating friction and a sense of epistemological dissonance.

The second recurring focus of literature is power differences and cultural hierarchies embedded within international schools. Based on the theorisation of social class, Tarc and Tarc (2017) introduce the concept of “middling international school teachers” to describe expatriate teachers in the Global South as who occupy an ambiguous social position within international schools. Despite their relative privilege, expatriate teachers can experience professional marginalisation – viewed more as service providers than professionals – by both school leadership and students’ parents, reflecting hierarchies and tensions between professional identity and institutional expectations (Bunnell, 2017; Tarc and Tarc, 2017).

The cultural hierarchy is even more evident in the dynamics between expatriate and local teachers in international schools (Tanu, 2018; Gibson and Bailey, 2023; Hammer, 2021; Bright and Poole, 2025). Tanu (2018), in a study at an international school in Indonesia, revealed a hierarchy of teachers, which is reflected in a 3-tiered pay scale. This scale places local teachers at the bottom, locally hired expatriate teachers at the middle rank, and expatriate teachers hired overseas at the top. Gibson and Bailey (2023) have also found an income hierarchy at an international school in Malaysia: non-white teachers were marginalised, paid less, and kept in lower-status roles inside the school. According to Gibson and Bailey (2023), the establishment of international schools was influenced by racial quotas and the desire to provide an aspirational education that often drew connections to the host country’s colonial past. These racial quotas are relevant in Vietnamese context. Williams and Richardson (2023) have found strong connections among Vietnamese teachers with non-white expatriate teachers compared to their American, Canadian, or European colleagues. Similarly, Hammer (2021) have found a “split salary” situation between the Vietnamese and expatriate teachers. Hammer (2021) further attributes this situation to international schools’ branding Western education as superior to local alternatives, underscoring colonialism, othering, and whiteness superiority. As a

result, there is a diminished morale and motivation among local Vietnamese teachers (Ibid.). They often feel powerless in the salary imbalance situation and feel the need to continually prove their competence (Ibid.) – a dynamic also reflected in this thesis’s findings (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#)). According to Hammer (2021), the cultural hierarchy at international school reflects broader patterns of neocolonialism. Bright and Poole (2025) indicate that expatriate teachers often view their roles as agents of cultural change – an outlook that can conflict with Vietnam’s education objectives, especially in socialisation, citizenship, and national identity. This tension is highlighted when Western teachers’ views on cultural change are influenced by underlying narratives of Western superiority (Ibid.).

The marginalisation of local teachers in international schools is also epistemic. Lai et al. (2016) contend that local teachers’ identities are marginalised in many international schools in China due to the dominance of Western expatriate staff’s epistemologies and teaching practices. Such schools often position expatriate teachers as embodying “authentic” international expertise while relegating local teachers to secondary roles (Tanu, 2018). Therefore, they have prioritised Western-educated, native English-speaking teachers (Grimshaw, 2015; Ruecker and Ives, 2015). According to Dunne and Edwards (2010), many international schools rely on local teachers to bridge the gap between their expatriate personnel and host communities, guiding them through the complexities of local culture and facilitating their integration into host cultures. Local teachers are caught between upholding international school policies, often shaped by Western values, and maintaining respect for local norms (Ibid.). The epistemic imbalance is echoed by Williams and Richardson (2023) in a study on international schools in Vietnam. In such schools, expatriate teachers are often viewed as experts in their schools due to the emphasis on English language acquisition and international curricula (Williams and Richardson, 2023). As a result, Vietnamese teachers may feel hesitant or uneasy about offering advice to their expatriate colleagues (Ibid.).

Despite a growing body of research on cultural hierarchies at international schools, there remains a significant research gap concerning the lived experiences and identity construction of Vietnamese teachers. Most studies adopt a Eurocentric focus, either in their theoretical frameworks or explicitly in their focus on expatriate teachers (e.g., Tarc and Tarc, 2017; Lee and Wright, 2016; Williams and Richardson, 2023). For instance, frameworks based on social class – a concept rooted in Western modernity (e.g., Tarc and Tarc, 2017) may not align with Vietnam’s societal organisation, where class consciousness is emphasised rather than class division and reproduction (Nguyen and Dang, 2024). Similarly, although Williams and Richardson (2023) conduct their research in the Vietnamese context, they study Vietnamese teachers through Bourdieu’s theory of social capital – a framework grounded in Western modernity/coloniality. Moreover, as the majority of studies on teachers’ identities in international schools operate within a postcolonial framework (e.g., Hammer, 2021; Lai et al., 2016; Tanu, 2018; Gibson and Bailey, 2023), it is essential advance this body of research by adopting a decolonial approach. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), decolonial approach demands

beyond acknowledging lasting legacies of colonialism and recognising persistent epistemological imbalances; it requires actively challenging dominant ways of knowing. This thesis addresses these gaps by offering a culturally grounded understanding of local Vietnamese teachers' identity using the concept of *bản sắc*. *Bản sắc* captures the collectivist and socialist embedded construction of "self" that shape teachers' identity. By centering this concept, the study contributes to the decolonisation of educational research and responds to calls for epistemic pluralism in understanding teachers' identity.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the politics of international schools, which provides the background for the thesis as well as theoretical references for the findings chapters. The key takeaways from this chapter are:

- There has been no universal definition for international schools, and the question of how "international" these schools are has remained unanswered. In Vietnam, international schools are identified as schools with foreign investment in policy documents (Vietnamese Government, 2018). Recently, many East and Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of international schools (ISC Research, 2025a, 2025b). This growth occurred due to the demands of local affluent families who seek alternative education pathways outside of the public education system (Bui, 2014; Wright, 2024; GSE, 2025).
- International schools in Vietnam have increasingly been embedded within broader neoliberal capitalist principles that commodify education and prioritise market-oriented values. The growth of international schools, driven by local demand and deregulation, positions education as a consumer product. Thus, international schools potentially reflect deeper tensions between global capitalist norms and local cultural values (Song, 2013; Rizvi, 2009a; Kim and Mobrand, 2019). Recognising this dynamic is crucial for understanding local teachers' *bản sắc* within the influences of neoliberal capitalism.
- While international schools are often positioned as sites promoting cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan capitals (Young, 2023; Tanu, 2018), these ideals frequently reflect Eurocentric values and reinforce colonial hierarchies. The concept of cosmopolitan nationalism, particularly in Vietnam, provided a more nuanced lens, acknowledging the intersection of global aspirations and socialist-nationalist educational goals (Bright and Poole, 2025).
- Despite the increasing access to international schools, they remain somewhat exclusive, given the high amount of tuition fees and percentage of student enrolment compared to the total student populations in Vietnam. However, this exclusivity cannot be solely interpreted through social class assumption; it can also be ideological, reflecting differing educational

values among families. By interrogating the assumptions behind Western social class frameworks, this thesis instead acknowledges Vietnam's socialist class consciousness. This approach enables a more culturally grounded analysis of the education landscape and how it has shaped teachers' bản sắc.

- Most importantly, the chapter has addressed a critical gap in existing literature: the lived experiences and identity construction of local Vietnamese teachers in international schools – an area largely overlooked in studies that focus on expatriate teachers and Eurocentric theoretical frameworks. While prior research highlights cultural hierarchies, pay disparities, and epistemic marginalisation of local teachers, it often remains within a postcolonial lens (e.g., Hammer, 2021; Lai et al., 2016; Tanu, 2018; Gibson and Bailey, 2023). Acknowledging this, the thesis advances a decolonial approach through the Vietnamese culturally grounded concept of bản sắc. In doing so, the thesis fosters a pluralistic understanding of teacher identity in an education landscape influenced by neoliberal capitalism.

Having critically discussed literature on the politics of international schools and teachers' experiences and identity within these schools, the following chapter outlines the methodologies employed in this thesis.

Chapter 6: Research methodology

6.1 Introduction

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have provided the theoretical foundation for this thesis in terms of the collectivist and individualist societies, the self-construals, postcolonial theory, and the politics of international schools. Drawing on these materials, this chapter addresses methodological approach, theoretical framework, and methodology employed in this study.

The chapter is structured into four main sections. Section 6.2 elaborates on the methodological approach including the research paradigm, ontological and epistemological positions, theoretical positioning. Section 6.3 introduces the theoretical framework informed by postcolonial theory and conceptual framework incorporating socio-constructivist theories of identity. Section 6.4 presents the research methodology, detailing the adoption of a comparative research approach supported by qualitative methods, including one-to-one interviews, focus group discussions, and school observations. Throughout this section, ethical considerations as well as the data credibility and validity are also addressed. Section 6.5 elaborates on the qualitative methods in practice, covering sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

The chapter concludes with identifying key takeaways and how they are incorporated into subsequent chapters. Throughout this chapter, my positionality as the researcher is discussed in relation to its implications on theoretical commitments, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also addresses the limitations of positionality as well as measures taken to mitigate them.

6.2 Methodological approach

The study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm and adopted relativist epistemology in addition to the relativist ontology (see Figure 6.1). In this research, the interpretivist research paradigm represents a qualitative approach aiming at comprehending the significance of human experiences and social phenomena from individual perspectives. Interpretivism posits that knowledge is socially constructed and differs according to individual perspectives (Crotty, 1998). The interpretivist paradigm recognises that human behaviour and social phenomena were inherently linked to their contextual factors. Examining these phenomena within their specific cultural, historical, and social contexts is essential for understanding them (Schwandt, 2014). Social norms, language, and cultural values also significantly influence individual interpretations of reality (Ibid.). Situated within the interpretivist paradigm, this research focuses on the exploration of teachers' perceptions of who they are to understand the subjective realm of human experience. This aligns with interpretive scholars who argued that reality was a social construction (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). In the

interpretivist paradigm, the research aims to understand teachers' subjective perceptions within social contexts to gain insights into bản sắc.

This research adopts a relativist ontology, which is concerned with multiple realities that could be explored through interactions between the researcher and teachers (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Relativist ontology posits that reality is not singular or fixed; instead, it is fluid and varies depending on the individual or social group. Different people experience the world uniquely, leading to the creation of different realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For example, two teachers could have different perceptions of the same working environment. Moreover, relativist ontology postulates that reality was socially constructed and shaped through human interactions and cultural norms (Berger and Luckmann, 2016), which was evident in the conceptual framework of bản sắc (see [Section 6.3.2](#)). Relativist ontology contends that individuals create meaning through their interactions with others, meaning that knowledge and reality was co-constructed in specific contexts (Berger and Luckmann, 2016). In light of this, this research embraces subjectivity, both in terms of the participants' experiences and the researcher's influence on the research process. The researcher needs to be reflexive, acknowledging their own role in shaping the research findings. This reflexivity is essential because the researcher's positionality including cognitive perspective, beliefs, values and interpretations contributes to the co-construction of meaning (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

This research adopts a relational epistemological position and argued that bản sắc is shaped and reshaped by social interactions. Relational epistemology asserts that knowledge is inherently located within certain social, cultural, and environmental contexts (Thayer-Bacon, 1997). Relational epistemology also acknowledges that several contexts influenced the generation, dissemination, and comprehension of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Thayer-Bacon, 1997), further fostering decolonial approach. Utilising this epistemology, this research contends that bản sắc is constructed via interactions between teachers and their work environment and Vietnamese society.

Importantly, this research employs decolonial approach, grounded in postcolonial theory and socio-constructivist theories of identity. These theoretical frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of how bản sắc is shaped in social contexts of the work environment and Vietnamese society over time. Postcolonial theory highlights the ways in which colonial histories and legacies continue to influence contemporary social structures, including education in Vietnam. It critiques the power dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised and emphasises the role of culture, language, and identity in the construction of knowledge (Said, 1995; Spivak, 2004; Bhabha, 1994). Meanwhile, socio-constructivist theory views identity as something that is not fixed or inherent but continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interactions (Wenger, 1999). Teachers' bản sắc is therefore, viewed as a dynamic and relational process that is influenced by interactions with colleagues, students, school leaders, and the broader Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems.

The research adopts a comparative methodology to examine the different social contexts in the work environment of public school and international school teachers. Comparative research methodology enables the identification of similarities and differences (Ragin, 2014) across the two groups of teachers, to better understand the impact of contextual elements in bản sắc. To gather data, qualitative methods are employed including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, with thematic analysis. This methodological approach allows this study to offer a comprehensive approach to capture the complexities and nuances of Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc.

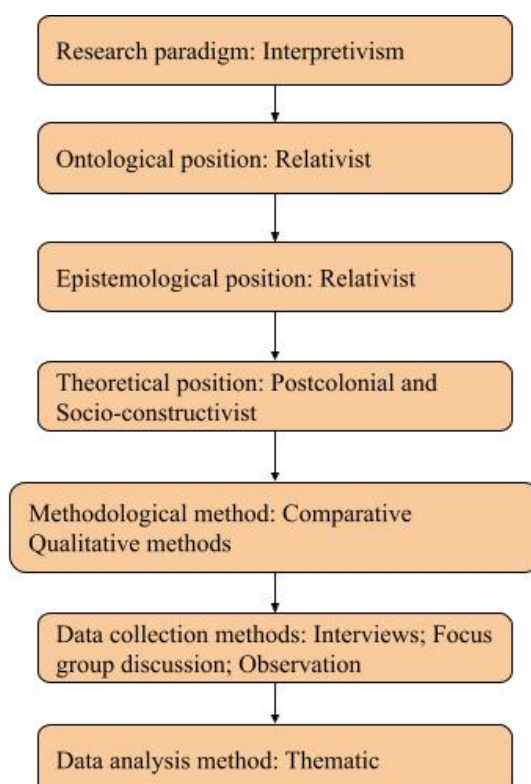


Figure 6.1: The methodological approach

6.3 The theoretical framework

6.3.1 Postcolonial theory

Postcolonial theory is foundational for this thesis, fostering the understanding of colonial legacies and epistemological imbalances when conceptualising bản sắc. Bản sắc is a uniquely Vietnamese term with no precise English equivalent. It is often translated as “identity” in English; however, such translation does not fully capture its meaning. The term bản originates from “self,” while sắc denotes “colour(s),” making its literal translation “the colour(s) of self.” This linguistic distinction highlights a misalignment between common Western conceptualisations of identity and its Vietnamese counterpart. In Vietnam, a collectivist society, bản sắc is often understood in relation to bản sắc văn hóa (cultural identity), bản sắc dân tộc (national identity), signifying a strong tie to

societal roles rather than personal agency (see [Chapter 3, section 3.4](#)). Thus, teaching in Vietnam is not merely a profession but a deeply embedded societal role (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.3](#)). This misalignment reflects the dominance of Western epistemologies in academic research, which often silences other knowledge systems through “epistemicide” (Mignolo, 2011).

Furthermore, colonial discourse and Western modernity has systematically erased non-Western knowledge systems, positioning Western epistemology as universal, objective, and superior (Santos, 2015; Seth, 2021). As a result, knowledge from the non-West has remained marginalised (Santos, 2015; Pennycook, 1998; Mignolo, 2003; Altbach, 2007). Mignolo (2011) critiques the assumption that Western modernity represents a universal and progressive force, arguing that it has always relied on the exploitation and subjugation of non-Western peoples. He challenges the notion that Western modernity is the only viable model for progress, emphasising the importance of diverse traditions and worldviews in shaping knowledge, governance, and society (Ibid.). Recognising this, my thesis embraces a decolonial research approach by steering away from the notion that identity must be universally understood through one universal framework (Santos, 2015; Mignolo, 2011; Walsh, 2007). Exploring *bản sắc*, my thesis foregrounds the voices of Vietnamese teachers, capturing how they negotiate their identities while navigating Western influences (Walsh, 2007). By embracing a decolonial approach, this study is grounded in local epistemologies, ensuring that Vietnamese understandings of *bản sắc* were prioritised and valued. However, this research does not dismiss Western epistemologies but rather fostered dialogue between Western and non-Western epistemological traditions. As decolonial theorists emphasise, multiple epistemologies and ontologies can coexist without one being subordinated to the other (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2015; You, 2019).

Additionally, postcolonial theory enables this research to dismantle colonial discourses, challenge power imbalances, and reclaim marginalised perspectives (Spivak, 2004; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Gandhi, 1998). Utilising a decolonial approach, my research engages with Vietnamese participants in their native language. Data was collected and analysed in Vietnamese to preserve the authenticity of participants’ lived experiences, with necessary excerpts translated into English for dissemination. Although the thesis is written in English – the dominant academic language – key concepts of *bản sắc* remain in Vietnamese to retain their cultural and epistemological significance (see [Chapter 7, section 7.2](#)).

Moreover, as this research examines teachers in international schools where English is the primary language of instruction, it was crucial to address the postcoloniality of English. Due to globalisation, former colonial languages – especially English – have become dominant, granting cosmopolitan capital to postcolonial subjects in a neoliberal capitalist world (Tanu, 2018; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Throughout the discussion on *bản sắc* among international school teachers (see [Chapter 9](#)), this thesis incorporates postcolonial theory to address linguistic hierarchies (Young, 2020; Tanu, 2018; Ngũgĩ, 1986).

The historical and societal aspects of Vietnam also call for the significance of postcolonial theory in this research. Vietnam's long history of resistance against colonial empires has profoundly shaped its national identity. Research has pointed out that colonial powers imposed their authority upon the colonised, influencing how postcolonial nations conceptualise their identities (Chan, 2008; Rukundwa and Van Aarde, 2007). While formal colonial rule has ended, coloniality persists, maintaining patterns of domination (Quijano, 2000). This is evident in Vietnam, where colonial history continues to shape national identity, particularly through education. For instance, Vietnamese history and literature textbooks teach Secondary school students about the authentic narratives of colonial oppression, countering the colonisers' "civilising mission" narrative (Daughton, 2006) and emphasising the significance of national identity.

This study is further contextualised by two key educational reform policies – Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP – which reflects global education agendas on policies (see [Chapter 2, section 2.2](#)). Postcolonial scholarships critique such alignment as a marginalisation of the local epistemology (see [Chapter 4, section 4.4](#)). Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP has pushed for privatisation in education, perpetuating neoliberal capitalism (see [Chapter 5, section 5.4](#)). Embracing the decolonial approach, the thesis discusses the tensions in Vietnam's education landscape as neoliberal capitalism might conflict with Vietnam's socialism (see [Chapter 10](#)).

Furthermore, the education reform (Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP) encourages the expansion of international schools in Vietnam. As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), international schooling has been criticised for its cultural hierarchies, reinforcing Western epistemological dominance, and marginalising the identities of local teachers (Tanu, 2018; Gibson and Bailey, 2023; Hammer, 2021; Bright and Poole, 2025; Williams and Richardson, 2023). Thus, this thesis incorporates postcolonial theory (e.g., Tanu, 2018; Bhabha, 1994; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Said, 1995) to discuss the cultural hierarchies at international schools (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). The work of Bhabha (1994) is the foundation for the discussion on hybrid bản sắc of international school teachers.

Overall, postcolonial theory provides the theoretical foundation for this thesis by challenging dominant Western epistemologies, addressing linguistic and cultural hierarchies, and analysing the coloniality of globalised education in Vietnam. Through a decolonial approach, this research foreground bản sắc as an inherently Vietnamese concept, exploring how teachers negotiate their identities within the complex interplay of globalisation, neoliberal capitalism, postcoloniality, and Vietnamese culture, traditions, value and belief system.

[6.3.2 Socio-constructivist theories of identity](#)

Employing the decolonial approach in research, this thesis steers away from imposing universal frameworks of teachers' identity which often embraces the individualistic approach (e.g., Chávez et al., 2022; Edwards, 2015; Beijgaard et al., 2004). Instead, to conceptualise bản sắc, I

incorporate socio-constructivist theories on identity such as Brewer and Gardner (1996); Dewey (1986); Wenger (1998, 1999) as well as Asian and Latin-American theories of self and identity (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Ortega, 2001, 2016). The works on bản sắc văn hóa (cultural identity) by Vietnamese authors (Phan, 2010; Ngô, 2014) are also employed. Definition of bản sắc in Vietnamese dictionaries also informed the conceptualisation of the concept. Thus, this thesis conceptualised bản sắc of teachers as *a dynamic ongoing process and a socially constructed phenomenon of who they are as shaped and reshaped by the social interactions within the social contexts when navigating the role of a teacher in Vietnamese society*. The conceptual framework bản sắc is understood in two parts: bản (self) and domains of bản sắc. Bản (self) consists of the independent and interdependent self. Meanwhile, bản sắc is constructed and perceived in three domains: temporal, social, and spatial. These three domains share a dynamic and interrelational relationship with one another, and together with bản construct teachers' bản sắc.

Bản (Self)

The conceptualisation of bản is grounded in Markus and Kitayama's (1998) theory of independent and interdependent self-construals. The independent self-construal refers to a self-concept that is distinct from others, characterised by autonomy, internal consistency, and self-sufficiency (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). This perspective emphasises individuality, personal achievements, and self-expression, with individuals prioritising their internal attributes, emotions, and aspirations over external influences (Singelis and Brown, 1995). Key characteristics of this self-construal include egocentrism, separateness, autonomy, and self-containment, reinforcing the notion of the self as a unified and bounded entity (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). In social interactions, individuals with an independent self-construal tend to assert their uniqueness and make decisions based on personal goals rather than collective expectations (Markus and Kitayama, 1998).

In contrast, the interdependent self-construal defines the self in relation to others, emphasising interconnectedness, societal roles, and communal responsibilities (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). Unlike the independent self, which prioritises personal attributes, the interdependent self is shaped by external and public aspects such as societal standing, relationships, and obligations. This form of self-construal fosters a strong sense of belonging, conformity to social norms, and an awareness of one's role within a group (Singelis and Brown, 1995). It also involves heightened sensitivity to others' thoughts and intentions, reinforcing the importance of social harmony. In collectivist societies such as Vietnam, the interdependent self-construals are deeply rooted in language, cultural norms, values, and belief systems (see [Chapter 3, section 3.4](#)). It is the self that is in relation to others (e.g., friends, father, mother, siblings, teachers). It is adaptable and changeable and focuses on the shared aspects, values, norms, and goals of a group, influencing an individual's sense of belonging and participation in a broader social context.

Although the independent and interdependent self-construals are often conceptualised as distinct, they can coexist within individuals, overlapping and shifting depending on situational and cultural contexts (Deaux and Perkins, 2015). The prominence of one type of self-construal over the other is influenced by the environment, societal expectations, and specific interactions. In many social settings, individuals may navigate between these two self-construals, adapting their self-perception and behaviour in response to different relational situations.

Three domains of bản sắc

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), Vietnamese society places a strong emphasis on collective values, where individuals are deeply embedded in social relationships and hierarchical structures. In this context, teachers are not only educators within the classroom but also integral members of society, expected to fulfill their roles in alignment with societal expectations. Their identity is shaped not only by their professional environment but also by broader cultures, traditions, values and belief systems. To examine bản sắc, this thesis adopts a socio-constructivist perspective, which conceptualises identity as a socially constructed and continuously evolving phenomenon. Identity is shaped and reshaped through social interactions, cultural contexts, and language (Gergen, 1999; Wenger, 1999; Erikson, 1994). Rather than being a fixed or inherent attribute, bản sắc emerges through dynamic engagement with one's surroundings.

The thesis conceptualises bản sắc across three interrelated domains: temporal, social, and spatial (see Figure 6.2). These domains are not distinct or independent but rather exist in a dynamic, interwoven relationship, continuously influencing and shaping one another. Together, they form the foundation of teachers' bản sắc, reflecting the complex interplay between time, social interactions, and social fabrics of the wider society.

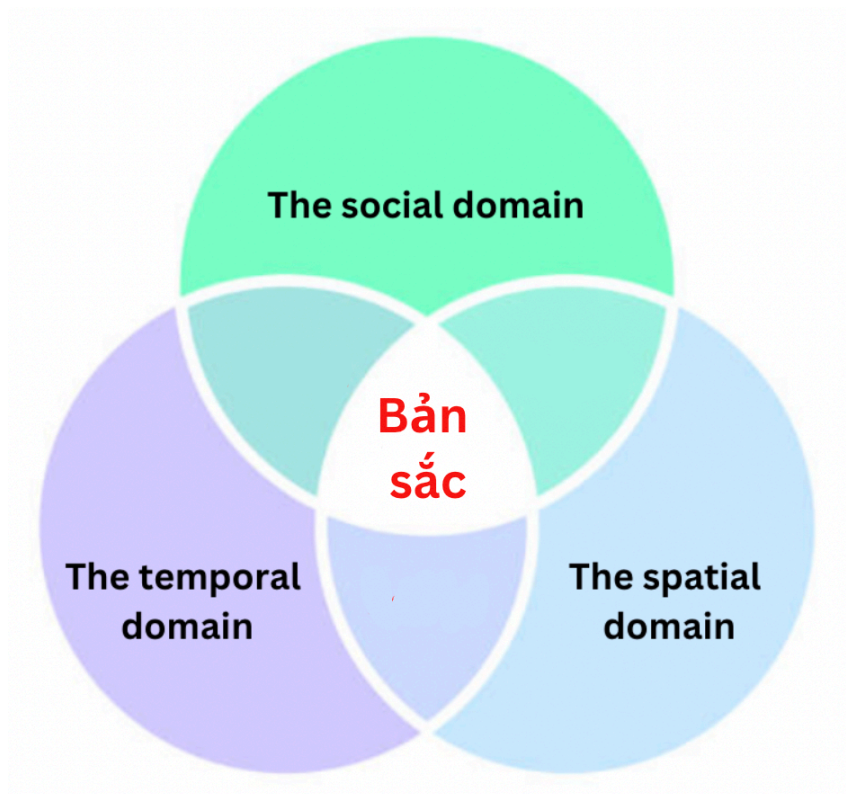


Figure 6.2: The conceptualisation of bản sắc in three domains

The temporal domain

The temporal domain illustrates the changing nature of bản sắc due to changes in teachers' experiences. In this regard, past experiences, present experiences, and imagined future experiences together construct bản sắc. In this domain, the past, present, and future aspirations of teachers continually reflect and influence one another. To conceptualise this domain, the work of Dewey (1986), Erikson (1994), and Wenger (1999) are crucial.

First and foremost, the temporal domain is about the negotiation and projection of bản sắc across past, present, and imagined future experiences. Wenger (1999) characterises past experiences as memories and posits that identity is constructed through the necessity of recognising ourselves within replayable memories. Dewey's exploration of experiences indicates a clear relationship among anticipated life goals, present experiences, and future expectations (Dewey, 1986). According to Dewey, it is essential to shape the present to maximise the potential benefits arising from our current realities, which then construct our experiences (Ibid.). We integrate our past experiences and their interpretations into a coherent trajectory that we construe as being one person (Erikson, 1994). Erikson conceptualises identity as a dynamic and continuous process rather than a static state, persisting throughout the life cycle. Wenger (1999) also defines identity in relation to trajectories, asserting that it does not exist as an isolated object but is instead formed through the ongoing process of negotiating the "self." Thus, the construction of identity is a continuous process rather than a pre-

existing state. According to Wenger, within social contexts, the temporality of identity construction is more intricate than a linear conception of time, with identities shaped by the interplay of various convergent and divergent trajectories (Ibid.). He also posits that the term trajectory implies not a predictable or mapped path, but rather continuous motion characterised by its own momentum alongside a range of influencing factors.

Therefore, this thesis contends that the temporal domain of *bản sắc* is fluid as it is constructed across temporal dimensions, linking the past, present, and future experiences. *Bản sắc* integrates the past and the future in the process of negotiating the present, as our experiences are continuously evolving and shaped by changes in life circumstances. Past experiences and the imagined future shape present experiences, while the imagined future is influenced by both past and present contexts. The past includes not only events that have transpired but also the present, which is swiftly transitioning into the past. The past is subject to continual reinterpretation. The present is transient, rapidly becoming the past, and the future is perpetually elusive, existing in a manner that it is already part of the past (see Figure 6.3).

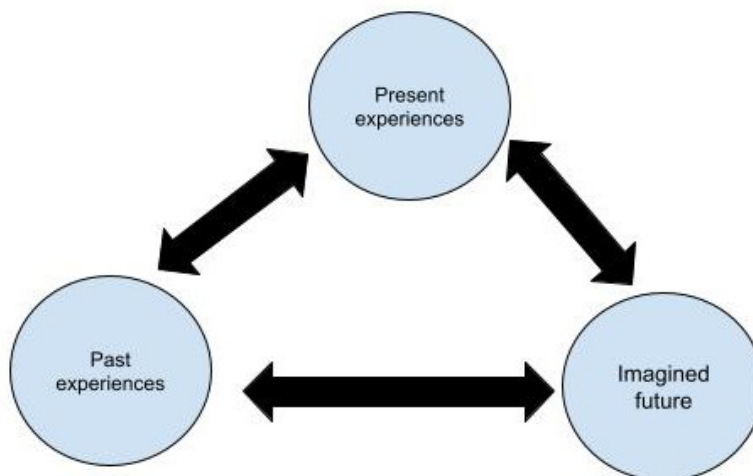


Figure 6.3: The temporal domain of bản sắc

By conceptualising *bản sắc* as a continuous negotiation of experiences, this study does not presume that the negotiation process relies solely on either agreement or conflict. Erikson (1994) suggests that the resolution of conflicts among various aspects of the self contributes to identity formation; however, identity may not solely arise from such conflicts. *Bản sắc* can also be established through an individual's acceptance of changes in life circumstances where experiences occur, especially in a society where group harmony is valued. In this sense, the interplay of tension, conflict, or consensus regarding changes creates a dynamic relationship among past, present, and future experiences. Consequently, *bản sắc* represents the awareness of one's bản (self) and continuous in time (through negotiation). Therefore, in the temporal domain, *bản sắc* is both about 'being' and 'becoming'. Hence, the work of *bản sắc* is ongoing and pervasive. We define who we are based on

our current experience in the present moment, but these experiences have a dynamic relation with the past and imagined future experiences. However, those experiences can't be understood without social contexts (Dewey, 1986).

The social domain

In the social domain, I argue that *bản sắc* must be understood within social contexts through social interactions. Here, social interaction is defined as teachers' participation and engagement in their social environment, including classrooms and schools. These social interactions shape and reshape teachers' experiences, fostering the negotiation and projection of *bản sắc* within the temporal domain. To conceptualise this domain, I incorporate Wenger's (1999) work on identity in the *Community of practice*.

First, *bản sắc* is formed through the negotiation of meanings derived from social interactions. Wenger (1999) posits that identity is socially constructed, not only because it is expressed through social discourse about the self and social categories but also because it emerges as a lived experience within specific communities. This perspective aligns with Erikson (1994), who asserts that individuals must navigate and assimilate the values and expectations of their social contexts to cultivate a coherent sense of self. For teachers, this negotiation and integration occur within their daily working environments – schools. Gergen (1999) conceptualises identity as a “relational being,” emphasising that individuals exist within a network of relationships and that their identity is intricately linked to the roles they assume and the connections they establish in social contexts. Thus, identity is not a fixed, singular characteristic but rather is shaped through social processes and interactions. In social settings, one perceives who they are through what they recognise and what they do not, what is immediately grasped and what remains obscure, what can be appropriated and what feels alien, and what can be negotiated versus what remains out of reach (Wenger, 1999). Thus, teachers perceive their *bản sắc* in relation to what is familiar and foreign, usable and unwieldy, understandable and opaque, negotiable and resistible.

Secondly, the interactions, through which *bản sắc* is perceived, are realised to the degree of our involvement in a community of practice (Wenger, 1999). Wenger (1999) refers to this involvement as participation and engagement. How teachers experience their job, how they interpret their position, how they understand what they teach, what they know, don't know, and don't try to know – all of these are neither simply individual choices nor simply the result of belonging to the social category, “teacher.” Instead, they are negotiated in the course of doing the job and interacting with their students, colleagues, school leaders, and other stakeholders in the educational community (e.g., inspectors, students' parents). Through these interactions, teachers not only reflect on their actions but also observe their actions through the reactions of others (Cooley, 1902). By doing so, they are able to perceive their *bản sắc* and understand who they are.

Thirdly, while arguing that teachers' bản sắc is perceived through social interaction, I do not contend that interaction is limited to conversational dialogues. Social interactions occur not only through conversations but also through teachers' perception of others. Moreover, social interactions also happen between individuals and the framework of their social context, through teachers' perceptions and reflection on school structures, organisation, culture, leadership, and management. Thus, I posit that social interaction is teachers' participation and engagement in their social contexts through:

- Communication through conversational dialogues with others (e.g., students, teachers, school leaders, parents, etc.)
- Perceptions and reflections on their relationship with others (e.g., students, teachers, school leaders, parents, etc.)
- Perceptions and reflections on the school's structure, school's climate, school organisation, leadership, and management in comparison with their values and beliefs.

While conflicts between the self and the social environment is important in identity development (Erikson, 1994), in the conceptualisation of teachers' bản sắc, I do not assume that teachers' social interactions are strictly defined by agreement or conflict with their social context. Instead, this study moves away from the binary assumption that social contexts are either sources of constraints and limitations (leading to inevitable conflicts) or sources of harmony (resulting in consistent agreement). Rather, social contexts provide an interplay between constraints and freedom, which vary across different social contexts and evolve due to the underlying influence of the temporal domain.

Previously, I have posited that changes in the temporal domain are embedded in social context, suggesting an intertwine between the social and temporal domains. This means teachers' experiences do not happen in a chronological sequence but a constant and continuous work in their social contexts. Teachers' past experiences shape the way they interact with their work environment, and through these interactions, teachers make meaning of their experiences (past, present, and imagined future). In other words, experiences and changes in the temporal domain are essential for the construction of bản sắc in the social domain, and without social contexts, experiences and changes in the temporal domain cannot happen.

The spatial domain

When conceptualising teachers' bản sắc, this study extends beyond their professional role that is confined to their working environment. Instead, I argue that teachers' bản sắc is inseparable from Vietnamese social fabrics; it is not something that teachers switch on and off upon entering or leaving the workplace. This notion is particularly evident in a collectivist society like Vietnam, where the

societal role is emphasised (see [Chapter 3, section 3.4](#)). Thus, in the spatial domain, teachers' bản sắc extends across spaces and transcends borders. Bản sắc is shaped not only within their work environment but also within the broader cultures, traditions, values and belief systems. To conceptualise this domain, the concept of multi-membership (Wenger, 1999) and New Mestiza (Ortega, 2001, 2016) are crucial.

Firstly, in this domain, Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems play a part in constructing teachers' bản sắc. Born and raised in Vietnam, teachers are exposed to these cultural foundations, which may also be embedded in their work environment – the social domain. The work of Vietnamese writers on cultural identity informs the conceptualisation of this domain. According to Phan (2010), Vietnamese cultural identity is rooted in collectivist and socialist values, particularly those influenced by Ho Chi Minh's ideologies. The cultural identity is also constituted of cultural characteristics that are stable, lasting, and unique to Vietnamese people (Nguyen, 2014; Ngô, 2014; Phan, 2010; Minh Chi, 2007) but also fluid and adaptable (Phan, 2010). As determined in The 5th Central Committee of Vietnamese Communist Party (term VIII), Vietnamese culture is the result of ongoing exchanges and the selective absorption of the essence of various civilisations, aimed at continuous national development (Central Committee of Vietnamese Communist Party, 1998). Preserving national cultural identity does not mean closing the door, accepting only one interpretation, accepting only one “book”, even if it is the bible (Ibid.). Rather, it requires adaptability in the face of change, embracing diverse international encounters and relationships while preserving its core values (Ibid.). This means, in the spatial domain, teachers' bản sắc is also fluid and adaptable amidst local traditions and Western influences.

Secondly, as previously stated in the temporal and social domains, teachers' bản sắc is the negotiation of meanings of their experiences embedded in social contexts. In this domain, social contexts go beyond their working environment to Vietnamese society where daily life experiences occur. Here, Wenger's concept of multi-membership is relevant. According to Wenger (1999), one's identity combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice. This means through participation in different communities/social groups (e.g., family, friend groups, dance classes), teachers negotiate their meanings to construct who they are. The reconciliation process also happens when one moves from one community/social group to another (Ibid.). This means teachers could bring the values of one community/social group to another. In those circumstances, teachers find ways to make their various forms of membership coexist. This work is not simply an additional concern for an independently defined identity viewed as a unitary object, but it is the core of what it means to be a person (Ibid.). The work of Ortega (2001) further fosters the conceptualisation of this domain. Ortega argues that identity is a “multiplicitous self” – a self that is neither singular nor fixed but instead overlapping (Ortega, 2016). This means, the self does not exist strictly within one world (social group or social context) or another but rather oscillates between them to varying degrees (Ibid.). Therefore, I argue that teachers' bản sắc is not just constructed in their

teaching environment but an interplay between their teaching environment and other social groups in broader society. When teachers go outside of the school, they don't pretend not to be a teacher; and what they experience outside of the school influences their bản sắc and vice versa. This means bản sắc of teachers' manifests, to some extent, in everything they do.

Thirdly, this domain intertwines with the temporal domain. According to Wenger (1998, 1999), one's multi-membership does not merge the specific trajectories we form in our various communities of practice into one; but neither does it decompose our identity into instinct trajectories in each community. This means teachers' bản sắc is also perceived by their multi-membership from the past which shapes their bản sắc in the present and the future. Therefore, the spatial domain also includes teachers' upbringing, the schools they went to, and their family's socio-economic background. Intertwined with the temporal domain, this domain is also about meaning negotiation when moving from one form of membership to another overtime such as teachers' employment change from public schools to international schools.

The interplay between the spatial and temporal domains is further evident in how changes in Vietnamese society over time influence teachers' experiences. While Vietnamese social, cultural, historical, and political contexts constantly shape and reshape teachers' experiences, these elements can also shift over time (e.g., from war to post-war context, or increasingly influenced by global/Western values). These shifts may cause a shift in teachers' experiences, and, consequently, shaping their bản sắc.

It is important to note that this thesis does not conceptualise the spatial domain in relation to religious aspects for two key reasons. Firstly, the collectivist values in Vietnam are epistemologically grounded in Confucianism (Truong et al., 2017), which is moral framework for personal conduct and governance rather than religion (Hofstede and Bond, 1998). This Confucian foundation contrasts sharply to Western epistemological roots, which are deeply influenced by Christianity's emphasis on universal truths (see [Chapter 3, subsection 3.2.1](#)). Secondly, education in Vietnam is explicitly secular. The Vietnam's Law on Education (2019, Article 20) mandates that all schools, public and non-public, refrain from propagating religious doctrines. While Western influences discussed in this thesis (e.g., individualism, English) may have historical ties to Christian thought (Heath, 2019; Zhang, 2014; Sampson, 2000), religious ideology is not a relevant lens for examining teachers' bản sắc in Vietnamese context.

This theoretical and conceptual framework inform the data analysis and discussion of teachers' bản sắc in subsequent chapters. Such theoretical commitment is also informed by my positionality as a Vietnamese researcher, Vietnamese citizen, and a former teacher, which is discussed in the following subsection.

6.3.3 Positionality in the theoretical commitment

In conceptualising bản sắc, this research acknowledges identity as shaped by sets of culture, traditions, values and belief systems specific to the Vietnamese context. Such a conceptualisation demands a deep, contextually grounded understanding of Vietnamese society – an understanding I bring as a Vietnamese citizen who was born, raised, and educated in the public education sector.

This insider perspective combined with my academic education in Western countries, positioned me to identify the Eurocentric underpinnings of dominant identity theories (e.g., Erikson, 1994; Mead, 1934), which are often rooted in individualist and developmentalist paradigms. My positionality has allowed me to adopt these theories selectively – drawing on useful concepts while also being aware of their limitations and applicability to Vietnamese context. This process has helped me avoid theoretical imposition. For instance, while frameworks such as self-construal theory (Markus and Kitayama, 1998) are useful, my insider knowledge helped identify tensions between the independent self-construal and the collectivist values of Vietnam. In doing so, the thesis advances a more nuanced conceptualisation of bản sắc, rooted in local epistemology while engaging critically with global academic discourse.

Being a member of a postcolonial society, I am in a strong position to reclaim and revalidate indigenous/local concepts (bản sắc) as legitimate tools of academic inquiry, rather than relying solely on Western constructs of identity. It enables me to approach postcolonial theory from a lived, localised perspective, amplifying voices and epistemologies that have historically been marginalised (Mignolo, 2011). This perspective reinforces the decolonial approach of this thesis (Walsh, 2007; Santos, 2015) by contributing to epistemic justice and validating local forms of knowledge (Dei, 2000; Alatas, 2006). When theoretical commitments – such as questioning Eurocentrism – are aligned with my lived experience as a researcher, it fosters a more coherent and culturally embedded research practice (Andreotti, 2011). This positionality enhances sensitivity to power dynamics, colonial legacies, and the hierarchies of knowledge production (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Therefore, the locally rooted concept of identity is validated.

Furthermore, Vietnamese, being my native language, has significantly shaped my position in this research. My native language has enabled me to engage with the term bản sắc which is not a common concept in international empirical research. In a study grounded in a culturally embedded concept like bản sắc, linguistic fluency allows for a more precise and culturally resonant engagement with literature written in Vietnamese and comprehend them from an authentic cultural perspective. It also fosters an “ecology of knowledge” (Santos, 2015) by including Vietnamese language and epistemology in the conceptual framework, thus strengthening the authenticity and decolonial orientation of the research (Smith, 2021; Walsh and Mignolo, 2018). Additionally, as the study is situated within the national education reform context, my ability to access and critically engage with the works of Vietnamese authors and policy documents without language barriers further contributes to the depth and rigour of the research.

6.4 Research methodology

Underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm with relativist ontological and epistemological positions as well as postcolonial theory and socio-constructivist theories of identity, this study utilised a comparative methodology with qualitative methods for data collection and analysis.

6.4.1 Comparative methodology

The adoption of the comparative methodology was firstly informed by my positionality as a researcher. From primary to upper-secondary education, I attended public schools where socialism and collectivist values were deeply embedded through moral education, Communist Party activities, and hierarchical teachers-student relationships. During this time, I viewed my teachers as distance authoritative figures through both fear and respect. Later, working in international schools exposed me to Western education that emphasised student-centredness and non-hierarchical relationships. While initially liberating, this shift created tensions around my own *bản sắc*, as I navigated a lack of traditional respect for teachers and the pressure to adapt my working style to Western working culture. The increasingly use of English at the international school further shaped my *bản sắc*, aligning it more with Western values. These conflicting experiences across public and international schools directly informed the comparative approach of this research, prompting a need for a profound investigation into how different work environments with assumingly contrasting values shape teacher identity.

Secondly, the context of this study highlights a division in the working conditions between international school teachers and public school teachers in Vietnam (see [Chapter 2](#)). These two groups operate within distinct institutional frameworks, engaging with different stakeholders and fulfilling roles that are defined differently in policy documents. Given these differences, a comparative methodology is well-suited for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of teachers' *bản sắc* across these two contexts by examining social acts and occurrences in their respective working environments. Comparative research systematically analyses cases or phenomena across various contexts – such as countries, institutions, or groups – to elucidate the impact of different variables on outcomes. This approach emphasises the significance of context in shaping the phenomenon under investigation (Auld and Morris, 2014). Ragin (2014) asserts that comparative research enhances the understanding of how contextual factors influence specific phenomena, which is relevant to *bản sắc* of teachers in the public and international schooling sectors in Vietnam.

Furthermore, the essence of comparative methodology lies in recognising both similarities and differences among the cases being studied (Stausberg, 2011; Holt and Turner, 1970). Researchers identify recurring patterns across cases as well as unique differences that may account for divergent outcomes (Shahrokh and Miri, 2019). Thus, the comparative methodology also allows the study to explore how teachers in both sectors collectively understand *bản sắc*, given they are all members of

Vietnamese society and thus exposed to the same culture, traditions, values and belief systems. However, as they work in different sectors which resulted in different social domains, the comparative methodology enabled the investigation of the divergence in their bản sắc. By doing so, the study offers an understanding of how institutional and socio-cultural factors intersect in shaping teachers' experiences and self-perceptions. Ultimately, based on the similarities and differences in teachers' bản sắc across the two educational sectors, comparative methodology fostered a discussion on how the education reform has shaped teachers' bản sắc in Vietnam's education landscape.

Additionally, comparative methodology aids researchers in developing, testing, and refining theories (Ragin, 2005, 2007; Shahrokh and Miri, 2019). This study begins with an initial conceptual framework of bản sắc based on existing theories which provides a foundation for engaging with participants to gather insights on the topic. By analysing these insights, I was able to assess whether the conceptual framework applied to both groups and determine areas requiring modification. In cases where adjustments were necessary, comparative methodology facilitated the refinement of the conceptualisation of bản sắc to reflect the unique experiences of each group. This iterative process underscores the methodological strength of comparative research in theory-building by allowing for dynamic engagement with empirical data.

Moreover, comparative methodology is an appropriate for this study because it aligns with relational epistemology (Epstein, 2008; Epstein and Carroll, 2005) which posits that knowledge is context-dependent (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Thayer-Bacon, 1997). In comparative research, knowledge derived from a specific context, such as an educational system in a particular country, cannot be comprehensively understood or generalised without considering the relationships and dynamics present within that context (Auld and Morris, 2014). In this light, the study examines bản sắc of each group of teachers by analysing the relationships among teachers, students, parents, and school leaders, the dynamics of other social groups (e.g., with family and friends), and perception of Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems. Relational epistemology also asserts the interdependence of knowledge and power (Crossley and Watson, 2003). As the thesis is grounded in postcolonial theory with decolonial approach, the comparative methodology allows for comparison of the power dynamic between the local traditions and Western influences, at international schools and in the national education landscape. It has helped this research explore how colonial power may influence teachers' bản sắc.

Lastly, relational epistemology underscores the significance of relationships among various elements within the research context (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). The conceptual framework of bản sắc examines the interconnections among teachers' backgrounds, working environments, and broader Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems. Employing a comparative methodology enables a comprehensive analysis of how multiple factors interact and shape teachers' bản sắc within different educational settings. Ultimately, it enables a nuanced understanding of bản sắc in the educational landscape which has been influenced by neoliberal capitalism.

6.4.2 Qualitative methods

In this study, qualitative methods are the principal methods for three key reasons. Firstly, qualitative methods align with the interpretivist paradigm, as they allow researchers to explore individuals' experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). Secondly, qualitative methods facilitate the collection of open-ended data (Silverman, 2016), which complements the conceptual framework and research paradigm by enabling the researcher to delve deeply into participants' perception and lived experiences. Thirdly, qualitative research fosters a rich understanding of data by examining contextual meanings and patterns (Ravitch and Carl, 2019). In comparative research, these methods help identify the subtleties of each case, uncover the mechanisms influencing certain outcomes, and explore the interplay between different elements (Ragin, 2014).

Through qualitative techniques such as interviews, focus group discussions, and observations (Creswell and Poth, 2016), I gained valuable insights into teachers' views, thoughts, and perceptions of *bản sắc*. These methods help capture teachers' life experiences, the environments in which they work, and the society in which they live (Hastie and Hay, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This comprehensive understanding has enabled me to examine both groups of teachers' *bản sắc* within the broader context of education reforms. Additionally, it allows for a nuanced exploration of how teachers' *bản sắc* is shaped in two different education settings. Given these considerations, this study employs a combination of three qualitative methods: one-to-one interviews, focus group discussions, and observations.

The combination of interviews, focus group discussions, and observations is commonly employed in social science research as it helps negotiate power relationships, minimise researcher bias, and access unseen aspects of daily life (Filep et al., 2017). Such combination further has enabled *bản sắc* to be explored from multiple angles. The one-to-one interviews informed individual teacher's perception of their *bản sắc*, the focus group discussion generated collective understanding of *bản sắc* of both groups of teachers, while the observation methods allowed the research to view *bản sắc* in action. The combination of interviews, focus group discussions, and observations also have allowed for cross-checking of findings (Denscombe, 2017; Patton, 2014), generating a more complete picture of *bản sắc*. Since the strengths and limitations of these three methods complement one another, I have been able to generate in-depth data across all three domains of the conceptual framework, ensuring a more comprehensive and robust analysis.

One-to-one semi-structured interview

Due to the complexity of teachers' bản sắc, there is a need for a flexible and less structured type of interview that creates space for versatile answers. The suitable method is a semi-structured one-to-one interview (see [Appendix A1 for the interview schedule](#)). During interviews, I used a prepared set of open-ended questions while allowing flexibility for the conversation to explore topics that arose naturally by asking impromptu questions depending on the participants' answers (Kallio et al., 2016). Thus, it facilitated two-way communication between the interviewer and the interviewees by making room for the interviewees' unique linguistic expressions and creating a comfortable environment where the participant felt free to express their thoughts.

In this research, the semi-structured interview method also fostered a balance between guidance and openness, making it useful for exploring complex phenomena, personal experiences, and nuanced perspectives. It also provided flexibility, allowing the interviewer to gather richer, more detailed data than in more rigid formats. Semi-structured interviews also enabled a flexibility for timing and content (Tisdell et al., 2025). For instance, I spent more time on certain questions and skipped over questions that were irrelevant to the research participants, by judging the dynamic of the conversation. In addition, semi-structured interviews gave participants a degree of control over the direction of the interview. While I guided the conversation, the participant had the freedom to emphasize topics they felt were most important. This participant-centred approach ensured that the data reflected the interviewee's experiences and perspectives in an authentic way rather than my own assumptions (Bryman, 2016).

Focus group discussion

The purpose of implementing a focus group discussion (FGD) is to attain richer and deeper data that might not surface in semi-structured interviews and to generate collective understanding of bản sắc in both groups of teachers (see [Appendix B for FGD schedule](#)). In this research, the focus group discussion compensated for the limitations of semi-structured interviews, such as the difficulties in observing participants' non-verbal language and participants' inability to fully engage due to distractions (i.e., internet issues and surrounding environments). The FGD also enriched the data, as I worked with the participants to conceptualise bản sắc; they commented on the initial findings from the semi-structured interviews, shared their perceptions of teachers' bản sắc, asked questions, added to each other's points of view, and compared emerging similarities and/or differences on how they view their bản sắc.

The hallmark of FGDs was group interaction, where participants discussed topics with each other rather than just responding to the interviewer. The FGD in this study included both groups of teachers (public school and international school) who came from different backgrounds and working environments. Thus, the FGD method generated rich qualitative data by capitalising on the group dynamics such as collective agreements, tension, or conflict that emerged during the discussion. The interactions between participants revealed how opinions were formed and negotiated, offering deeper

insights than individual interviews. Participants often responded to one another, clarified their thoughts, or even changed their views based on what others said (Morgan, 1997). This was useful for exploring *bản sắc* in action when participants reflected on themselves based on their perceptions of others.

In addition, the FGD method facilitated the exploration of complex issues and embraced relational epistemology in comparative research. *Bản sắc* is a complex concept comprising multiple elements, where participants needed to reflect on their experiences and hear others' perspectives before fully articulating their own views. Both groups of teachers worked with others to form a collective definition of *bản sắc* based on their shared experiences. Moreover, relational epistemology posited that knowledge was often co-constructed through the interaction (Thayer-Bacon, 1997). Therefore, the discussion prompted participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences, challenge each other's views, and build on each other's ideas. The relational epistemology in comparative research also highlights the collaboration between the researcher and participants who are from different disciplines in generating knowledge and gaining new insights (Dao et al., 2025). Therefore, during the FGD, the I worked closely with the participants to define and conceptualise *bản sắc*. This aligned with the nature of comparative research in testing and refining theories. As a result, the initial conceptual framework was revisited during data analysis and a new conceptual framework of *bản sắc* emerged as central to the research findings (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Observation

Using the observation method, I was able to gain an insider's view (Chatman, 1992), allowing for a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of their *bản sắc* rather than merely collecting them. Hence, observation complemented and rationalised data from interviews and FGDs (see [Table 6.9 for observation guidelines](#)). Moreover, as the social domain is a part of the framework of *bản sắc*, it is significant to explore the natural setting of the participants, such as classrooms and the whole school environment. This method allowed me to study behaviours in their authentic context, providing a deeper understanding of how teachers' interactions with stakeholders unfolded (Cohen et al., 2017). Moreover, observation provided rich, contextual data that was grounded in the actual environment where learning took place. I was able to capture the complexities of classroom interactions, including verbal and non-verbal communication, teacher-student interactions and relationships, classroom climate, school atmosphere (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017; Patton, 2014). Importantly, as the organisation of international schools varies, observation allowed the research to understand how the observed school operated. It also enabled the observation of classroom and school layouts which contributed greatly to the research findings.

A non-participant method was utilised during observation, allowing me to minimise my impact on the participants' behaviour. This was particularly important in educational settings where

maintaining the normal flow of classroom activities was crucial for capturing authentic and “neutral” data (Ciesielska et al., 2018). However, given the relativist ontological and epistemological positions that recognises the role of the researcher in data interpretation, it is ambitious to maintain the neutrality during observation. Thus, I adjusted my role depending on specific circumstances. Nonetheless, non-participant method was the primary observation method as I minimised my interference in teachers’ activities at the observation sites. During observation, I followed a loose framework informed by the conceptualisation of bản sắc in the social domain, fostering flexibility in recording teachers’ bản sắc in action. This method was qualitative and exploratory, fostering in-depth insights (Patton, 2014).

The following section details the data collection and analysis process as well as how it is informed by my positionality as the researcher. It also discusses the limitations of positionality and the measures taken to mitigate them.

6.5 Data collection and analysis

The data collection consisted of three phases: fourteen one-to-one interviews, one focus group discussion, and two school observations. The process of data collection spanned for ten months from November 2023 to September 2024, from the time of the first contact with interview participants to the last day of school observation. During this time, informal follow-up conversations occasionally occurred as I kept the participants’ contact information. Table 6.1 summaries the data collection and analysis timeline.

Method	Action	Timeline
One-to-one interview	Interview questionnaire finalisation	November 01, 2023
	Participant recruitment	November 08, 2023 - December 03, 2023
	Data collection	December 13, 2023 - December 28, 2023
	Data analysis - first round	December 28, 2023 - January 20, 2024
	Initial themes written up	January 25, 2024 - May 05, 2024
	Data analysis - second round (after FGD data analysis)	August 27, 2024 - September 05, 2024

	Data analysis - third round (after school observation)	October 03, 2024 - October 08, 2024
Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion themes finalisation	May 20, 2024
	Participant recruitment	August 13, 2024 - August 19, 2024
	Data collection	August 23, 2024
	Data analysis - first round	August 24, 2024 - August 26, 2024
	Data analysis - second round (after school observation)	October 01, 2024 - October 03, 2024
School observation	School mapping	May 20, 2024 - June 30, 2024
	Observation guidelines finalisation	August 28, 2024
	School principals' approvals	August 28, 2024 (public school) September 01, 2024 (international school)
	Data collection	September 03, 2024 - September 04, 2024 (public school) September 06, 2024 (international school)
	Data analysis	September 20, 2024 - September 30, 2024

Table 6.1: Data collection and analysis timeline

6.5.1 Positionality in data collection and analysis, its limitations, and how the study addresses them

Being a former public school student in Vietnam equipped me with a familiarity with the public education sector, which significantly enhanced the data collection process. This familiarity enabled me to recognise the manifestation of Vietnamese social values in school practices and interpret them within their sociocultural context. For instance, when observing student-teacher interactions, I was able to connect the dynamics to broader social hierarchies rooted in Confucian and collectivist traditions. Similarly, my previous experience working in an international school provided me with insights into the Western influences. This dual familiarity allowed me to engage

empathetically with international school teachers and critically identify the interplay between local tradition and Western influences at the observation sites.

During one-to-one interviews and the focus group discussion, my embedded knowledge of local experiences, cultural norms, and the education system fostered trust and rapport with participants. Teachers felt comfortable sharing their perspectives on sensitive and personal matters such as *bản sắc*, knowing that I shared similar cultural and professional touchpoints. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest, researchers who occupy the space of “insider-outsider” often gain deeper access to participants’ authentic narratives through mutual understanding and reduced social distance.

Being a member of a postcolonial society also enhanced my interpretive lens. My cultural embeddedness enabled me to grasp subtle contextual cues and cultural meanings that might be overlooked by an outsider. This deepened cultural resonance with participants strengthened the validity and authenticity of data interpretation (Smith, 2021), especially when participants discussed tensions between local traditions and globalised education ideologies. My awareness of postcolonial legacies and power dynamics – often embedded in language, institutional discourse, and identity negotiation – further shaped a research design that was ethical, respectful, and grounded in participants’ lived experiences. Thus, research participants were deeply engaged in the conversation during interviews and focus group discussion.

Language is a particularly significant dimension of my positionality. As Vietnamese is the native language mine and the research participants. Linguistic fluency allowed me to communicate without barriers, facilitating rapport and allowing participants to express themselves with nuance and cultural specificity. Since *bản sắc* is deeply embedded in language and cultural expressions, my ability to capture subtle emotional tones, cultural metaphors, and untranslatable expressions strengthened both the data collection and analysis processes. Translating key excerpts for the thesis was done with sensitivity to meaning, tone, and context – something that non-native speakers or professional translators unfamiliar with the cultural context might struggle to achieve (Esposito, 2001; Temple and Young, 2004). As Squires (2009) notes, translation in cross-language qualitative research is not merely technical but also interpretive; thus, my linguistic positionality ensured that the authenticity of participants’ voices was preserved.

Despite my deep cultural familiarity, I had been professionally detached from the Vietnamese education landscape for approximately seven years prior to conducting the study. This distance has limited my awareness of recent policy developments and on-the-ground changes in teaching practices. In this sense, I also occupied an outsider position. This detachment, however, proved valuable in maintaining analytical openness. It helped me avoid making assumptions based on prior knowledge and instead approach participants’ narratives with curiosity and critical distance (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Such reflexivity, essential in qualitative research, allowed me to remain open to the data provided.

While my positionality has brought significant strengths to this study, it has also presented several limitations that required critical reflection and mitigation.

In data collection, as an insider in Vietnamese society, my shared background with participants may have influenced the authenticity of their responses. Participants might have altered their narratives due to perceived commonality, resulting in selective disclosure or responses shaped by social desirability, especially around sensitive issues such as identity, institutional critique, or personal experiences (Mercer, 2007). To counteract this limitation, I often encouraged participants to provide more information by asking open-ended questions and follow-up questions. I also avoided sharing my own opinions that could make participants alter their narratives.

My navigating dual roles – as a researcher and a former teacher – could further influence participants' responses. Participants may have seen me more as a community member than an academic researcher, potentially blurring boundaries in the research relationship and influencing how freely they shared critical perspectives or challenges (Sikes, 2006). For example, one participant mentioned a new government decree without elaboration potentially due to the assumption that I shared the same background knowledge. To mitigate this limitation, I maintained transparency about my research role. I clearly communicated the purpose of the study, how data would be used, and sought informed consent. During observations, I adopted a non-intrusive stance, which helped position me more clearly as a researcher rather than a colleague or community member (Mercer, 2007). This helped maintain professional boundaries and reduce role confusion. In cases where participants offered vague responses based on assumed shared knowledge, I asked follow-up questions, cross-checked their responses with different data sets, supplemented the findings with contextual information. For example, when the aforementioned participant did not explain the government decree, I independently researched the decree and incorporated a brief explanation in the presentation of findings. My positionality as a Vietnamese native speaker enabled me to do this effectively and without significant difficulty.

In data analysis, as an insider in Vietnamese society, I was at risk of making tacit assumptions about shared cultural, institutional, or contextual knowledge with participants. This may have led to overlooking important explanations, skipping clarifications, or under-exploring nuanced meanings because they appear “obvious” or “already known” (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). To counteract this limitation, this study adopted several reflexive and methodological strategies, starting with acknowledging how my background, beliefs, and experiences shape the interpretation of data. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to surface underlying assumptions and minimise bias. I kept a reflexive journal throughout my PhD journey to document my thoughts, emotional responses, and emerging interpretations – thus tracking how my positionality influenced the research (Berger, 2015). To further reduce the influence of insider assumptions, I provided readers with rich contextual descriptions in footnotes when the research findings. This helped avoid

presuming shared knowledge and allowed readers to assess the transferability of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, my positionality introduced the risk of bias and subjectivity in interpreting data. My own experiences and perspectives, especially those related to my identity as a teacher in both public and international school systems, may have shaped the way I made sense of participants' narratives. This could result in a tendency to prioritise interpretations aligned with my expectations while overlooking contradictory or alternative meanings, signifying blind spots in data interpretation (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007). To counter potential blind spots and subjective interpretations, I engaged in regular discussions with my academic supervisors, who were not insiders. Their external perspectives helped reveal blind spots and encouraged alternative interpretations. It also added a layer of accountability and enhanced analytical depth (Unluer, 2012). Member checking was also employed to ensure accuracy and resonance. I shared preliminary findings and interpretations with participants to confirm that my analysis reflected their intended meanings (Birt et al., 2016). Additionally, in the focus group discussion, I revisited significant themes that emerged from one-to-one interviews, allowing participants to confirm, elaborate on, or reshape initial findings.

Finally, my strong empathy with participants, rooted in shared cultural and professional experiences, could have led to an under-analysis of conflict, tension, or power dynamics present in the data. As Berger (2015) cautions, excessive identification with participants can inhibit critical distance and analytical rigour. Thus, multiple data sets were utilised (i.e., interviews, focus group discussions, and observation) to cross-validate my findings. This helps counteract biases that may arise from a single perspective and reinforces credibility (Patton, 2014; Cohen et al., 2002). In addition, occasional follow-ups with participants occurred during data analysis to ensure that my interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings. Possible bias was also identified in my PhD reflexive journal.

Overall, my positionality as a Vietnamese researcher played a crucial role in shaping this research. It offered valuable insider insights that enhanced the cultural relevance, theoretical grounding, and depth of data interpretation. At the same time, I remained reflexive and transparent about the potential limitations my positionality posed. Through methodological strategies such as multiple qualitative methods, debriefing with supervisors, member checking, and reflexive journaling, I sought to address these limitations and uphold the credibility and rigour of the study. This critical self-awareness ensured that my positionality serves not only as a lens but also as a strength throughout the research process.

6.5.2 Phase 1: One-to-one interview

Sampling

The target population of this study comprised Vietnamese teachers from both public and international schools. A total of fourteen teachers were recruited for one-on-one interviews, with an equal distribution of seven participants from each sector. The target population was considered a hard-to-reach population because I was not geographically located in Vietnam and had not been directly involved in the Vietnam education landscape for seven years. Therefore, snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was employed to facilitate the recruitment (Naderifar et al., 2017). This method enabled me to identify and select participants who belonged to the target population with relevant experience with the education system in Vietnam (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The recruitment process began with teachers from my social network, using Facebook and LinkedIn as the primary channels for initial contact (Parker et al., 2019). These initial participants then connected me with potential participants from their network. While snowball sampling had inherent limitations, such as potential selection bias, I implemented control measures to ensure participant quality, alignment with the study's objectives and rigor. For participants from public school, I made sure participants met the following criteria:

(1) Participants must have a Vietnamese nationality, meaning they must have been born and lived in Vietnam until the date of the interviews. This criterion was essential due to the significance of the spatial domain in the conceptual framework, which included Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems. Ensuring that participants have been born and lived in Vietnam enabled in-depth insights on Vietnamese value systems.

(2) Only full-time teachers were selected to ensure that participants had comprehensive engagement with the school environment. Full-time employment was necessary for participants to fully understand school operations, interactions with stakeholders (e.g., students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents), aligning with the conceptual framework. Part-time teachers were excluded due to their limited work hours and potentially restricted full engagement with their environment.

(3) Participants must have worked at their current schools for at least three months before the interview. This requirement ensured that participants had sufficient time to integrate into their school settings, understand its organisational structure, and observe changes in their work environment that might influence their *bản sắc*. Given that *bản sắc* is conceptualised as fluid (temporal domain), participants needed adequate exposure to reflect on potential changes in *bản sắc*.

For participants from international schools, I made sure they meet the following criteria:

(1) Similar to public school teachers, participants from international schools must have been born and raised in Vietnam to provide insights into how their *bản sắc* is shaped by Vietnamese cultures, tradition, values and belief system.

(2) Participants must have been employed at an international school (foreign-invested schools) officially registered with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). This requirement ensured alignment with Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, which regulates the operation of international schools and the management of their teaching staff (see [Chapter 2, section 2.6](#)). The criterion also

eliminated schools that label themselves as “international” without foreign investment (Tâm, 2024; Communist Party Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2019).

(3) Similar to public school teachers, international school participants must have worked at their current schools for at least three months to ensure meaningful engagement with their school environment and a full understanding of its implications on their bản sắc.

The participant recruitment process spanned one month, from November 2023 to December 2023. After finalising the participants based on the recruitment criteria, formal invitations were sent via email to confirm their participation in the study.

The majority of interview participants from this study are from urban regions such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city (see Table 6.4). All of them are Kinh ethnic, the largest among 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam.

Data collection

The data collection process was conducted over a period of two weeks, from December 13, 2023 to December 28, 2023. All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, ensuring flexibility and efficiency in participant engagement. The interviews took place online for the following reasons. Firstly, it was due to the geographical difficulties as research participants were based in multiple cities across Vietnam. Conducting in-person interviews would have been challenging, requiring extensive travel, which would have been both time-consuming and cost-prohibitive. Additionally, I was unable to travel to Vietnam due to institutional commitments and limited research funding. Secondly, conducting interviews online removed the need for participants to travel to a specific location, potentially increasing their willingness to participate. This approach allowed participants to engage from a setting in which they felt comfortable, fostering a more open and candid discussion.

Prior to the interviews, ethical concerns were clearly communicated to all participants. Informed consent forms were provided in advance, ensuring participants fully understood their rights and the study’s purpose (see [Appendix E](#)). Participants who requested access to the interview questions prior to the session were given the questionnaire for reference. I also offered a comprehensive briefing, addressing any questions or concerns regarding ethical considerations, confidentiality, and data protection. To safeguard participant privacy, all personal data was stored on a password-protected computer, accessible only to myself. Confidentiality was reiterated at the beginning of each interview to reassure participants of their anonymity.

The interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes with the longest interview lasting for 83 minutes and the shortest 40 minutes. The interview questionnaires were designed based on the conceptual framework and therefore structured into three main sections – the temporal, social, spatial domains (see [Appendix A](#)).

To ensure that participants could express themselves freely, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, which was both the participants' and my native language. This decision aimed to ensure that participants felt comfortable and expressed themselves fully (Tsang, 1998) and

prevent language barriers and foster deeper engagement with the research topic. Overall, participants were highly engaged and provided rich and insightful responses. At the end of the interviews, all participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions and give recommendations for the study. I also shared contact information to address any follow-up queries and informed participants that they would be able to review the interview transcript for accuracy. They were also invited to take part in potential follow-up conversations and future stages of data collection, including focus group discussions and observations.

The interviews were audio-recorded and interview notes were taken throughout the process. The notes documented key themes emerging from participant responses and to identify areas requiring further investigation in the next stages of research.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis requires a systematic process of examining and organising raw data to develop a deeper understanding and extract meaningful insights beyond surface-level observations (Simon, 2019; Miles and Huberman, 1994). It involves identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within textual or visual data (Brooks et al., 2018). In this research, thematic analysis was conducted iteratively, with meaning gradually emerging throughout the process. As the study progressed, I revisited the data to refine and identify additional emerging themes, ensuring a comprehensive analysis.

To maintain the authenticity of the data, the analysis was conducted in Vietnamese, with themes, sub-themes, and codes were also in Vietnamese. Quotes used in dissemination of findings were translated into English. Given my background in English-Vietnamese translation, interpreting, and teaching English as a Second Language, the linguistic proficiency and contextual understanding allowed for accurate interpretation of meanings of data. Recognising that the study's readership includes both Vietnamese and English-speaking audiences, in cases where certain words or phrases carried culturally specific meanings, the original Vietnamese expressions were retained, accompanied by English translation in brackets and further meaning explanation in footnotes.

Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA. I followed a structured six-step approach: becoming familiar with the data by repeatedly reading transcripts, generating initial themes, identifying emerging themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing comprehensive research findings (Fuchs, 2023; Cernasev and Axon, 2023). The initial thematic framework was informed by the conceptual framework. In particular, the initial themes included the independent self and the interdependent self (see Table 6.2 for themes and [Appendix H](#)

for coding details) and encompassed the temporal domain, social domain, and spatial domain (see Table 6.3 for themes and Appendix I for coding details). Given that these domains are inherently interconnected within the theoretical framework, many data excerpts overlapped across multiple themes. For example, the quote “*My leaders are all very nice and they really know how to lead, they don’t rule but they guide*” (Yến) both belonged to the temporal domain and social domain theme. To account for this overlap, such excerpts were grouped into emerging “Intertwined zones,” reflecting the dynamic and interconnected nature of teachers’ bản sắc. This approach allowed for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how different aspects of bản sắc interact within the Vietnamese educational context.

Independent self	Interdependent self
Individual preference	Influence on others
Perception of themselves	Influenced by others
Independent pronouns	Perceive others
	Relate to others during the speech
	Perception of the work environment
	Influenced by the work environment
	Influenced by wider society
	Interdependent/ hierarchical pronouns
	Honorifics

Table 6.2: Themes and subthemes in interview analysis - Bản (Translated from Vietnamese)

Temporal domain	Social domain	Spatial domain	Intertwined zone
Past experiences	Relationship and interaction with students	Societal standing	Temporal - Social
Present experiences	Relationship and interaction with colleagues	Society’s values and expectations	Temporal - Spatial
The imagined future	Relationship and interaction with school	Values as a teacher	Social - Spatial

	leaders		
Changes	Relationship and interaction with parents	Connection with other teachers in society	Temporal - Social - Spatial
	Overall perception of the working environment		

Table 6.3: Themes and sub-themes in interview data analysis - three domains of bản sắc (Translated from Vietnamese)

For ethical concerns, the names of participants were kept anonymous. Thus, each participant was given an individual pseudonym (see Table 6.4 and Table 6.5).

Pseudonyms	Year(s) of experience	Subject	Graduated from	City/ region
Bình	0.5	Geography	University of Education	Ha Noi
Hương	7	English as a Second Language (ESL)	Ho Chi Minh city	Ho Chi Minh city
Trang	17	Physics	University of Education	Ho Chi Minh city
Linh	0.5	ESL	University of Agriculture and Forestry Teaching major	Ho Chi Minh city
Phan	6	ESL	Saigon University Education Faculty	Ho Chi Minh city
Vinh	6	Biology, ESL	International University	Ninh Binh
Như	2.5	ESL	Ho Chi Minh Open University	Ho Chi Minh city

			English faculties Teaching major	Linguistics
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Table 6.4: The demographic of public school teachers

Pseudonyms	Year(s) of experie nce	Subject	Graduated from	City/ Region
Thịnh	8	Science	University of Science, Chemistry major	Ho Chi Minh city
Trung	8	Mathematics	University of Education, Mathematics major	Ho Chi Minh city
Hồng	7-8	Science	University of Education, Physics major	Ho Chi Minh city
Hà	5	Vietnamese	University of Education	Ho Chi Minh city
Hoa	7	ESL	Hoa Sen University, English Linguistics faculties, Teaching major	Ho Chi Minh city
Minh	1	ESL	N/A	Ho Chi Minh city
Yến	9 months	ESL	Ho Chi Minh Open University, English Linguistics faculties, Teaching major	Ho Chi Minh city

Table 6.5: The demographic of international school teachers

After analysing the interview data, I identified several key areas requiring further investigation. First, although the data demonstrated an overlap between bản (self) and three domains of bản sắc, the precise ways in which these elements inform and shape each other remained unclear. Second, there was a lack of coherence in how research participants conceptualised bản sắc, as each individual approached the topic from a different perspective. Third, language use emerged as a significant theme, particularly among international school teachers, who frequently incorporated English vocabulary into their responses. Fourth, while the data highlighted the intertwining of the three domains – temporal, social, and spatial – for public school teachers, the dynamic between the social and spatial domains was less evident for international school teachers. Finally, as the interview data analysis treated each group of teachers separately, a comparative, collective understanding of bản sắc across both groups had yet to be fully explored. To address these gaps, the next phase of the study – focus group discussion – was designed to provide further clarification and deepen the analysis.

6.5.3 Phase 2: Focus group discussion

Sampling

Both groups of teachers participated in one focus group discussion (FGD), allowing Vietnamese teachers with similar backgrounds but different working environments to elaborate on their shared or divergent perspectives on bản sắc. The FGD included five teachers with three from public schools and two from international schools. One public school teacher and two of the public school were former interviewees. As previously mentioned, all interview participants were invited to join the FGD. However, due to geographical constraints and personal commitments, not all were able to attend. Two additional participants, who had been contacted for one-on-one interviews but were unable to schedule them, opted instead to take part in the FGD.

The recruitment criteria remained consistent with those used for the one-on-one interviews. The sampling process for the FGD was relatively brief, with participant outreach beginning on August 13, 2024. The discussion was successfully conducted on August 23, 2024.

All focus group participants live and work in Ho Chi Minh city and from the same ethnic group – Kinh.

Data collection

The focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted on August 23, 2024, in Ho Chi Minh City and lasted for 90 minutes. Although initially planned for 60 minutes, the discussion was extended by an additional 30 minutes due to the participants' high level of engagement. Similar to the interview protocol, at the beginning of the discussion, I introduced the study and outlined ethical considerations.

Participants were then provided with physical copies of the informed consent form for their approval (see [Appendix F](#)).

The content of the FGD was designed to address the gaps identified in the interview data analysis. The discussion followed a semi-structured format, consisting of five main themes that encouraged participants to express their thoughts freely while allowing the conversation to develop organically (see [Appendix B](#)). The questions were initially broad, generating diverse responses, and then became more focused as the discussion progressed (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). This approach ensured that key areas were explored while also giving participants the opportunity to introduce new perspectives that I may not have previously considered (Vaughn et al., 1996). For instance, when discussing the role of language in bản sắc, the original question focused on the use of English. However, participants expanded the discussion to include the role of the Vietnamese language, making connections between language use and the work environment.

As the FGD was designed as a space for open dialogue among teachers, I assumed the role of a facilitator, guiding the discussion while ensuring all participants had an opportunity to contribute. I introduced each question, moderated the conversation, and managed group dynamics to prevent any single participant from dominating the discussion. Probing questions were used to clarify points, explore topics in greater depth, and verify whether the my understanding of participant' collective thoughts was accurate (Krueger and Casey, 2015). For example, during the discussion of Questions 1 and 2 (see [Appendix C](#)), I visually represented participants' conceptualisation of bản sắc on a whiteboard (see [Appendix D](#)). The participants then evaluated and refined this conceptualisation until a collective agreement was reached. While some differing viewpoints emerged, no major conflicts or tensions arose during the discussion.

The FGD was audio-recorded, as one participant did not consent to video recording. In addition, I took detailed notes to document emerging themes and identify areas that required follow-up questions. These notes also informed the focused areas for the next stage of data collection – school observation. The discussion was conducted in Vietnamese, the shared mother tongue of both the participants and mine, allowing a smooth and nuanced exchange without language barriers. To aid reflection and facilitate participation, each participant was given a handout to brainstorm responses before engaging in whole-group discussion (see [Appendix C](#)). These handouts were later collected for data analysis.

At the end of the FDG, all participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide recommendations for the study. Due to their strong engagement with the discussion and enthusiasm for the topic, I and participants continued their conversation in an informal setting. Although this informal discussion was not audio-recorded, I documented key insights in field notes. This relaxed environment enabled participants to share more candid reflections on sensitive aspects of education that they may not have felt comfortable discussing during the formal session. By establishing and maintaining relationships with participants from the initial stages of one-to-one

interviews, I was able to foster an atmosphere of trust and openness. Building authentic relationships with participants, rooted in mutual respect and shared learning, enhances engagement and is particularly valuable when working with populations that may be difficult to reach (Freeman et al., 2021).

Data analysis

The audio-recorded data from the focus group discussion (FGD) was transcribed for analysis. Following the same approach used for interview data, thematic analysis was conducted in MAXQDA in Vietnamese. Key quotes were then translated into English in the presentation and discussion of findings. To preserve the authenticity of the data, culturally specific expressions were retained in Vietnamese, with accompanying footnote explanations where necessary.

The analysis of the FGD data was structured around the five key themes that guided the discussion. These initial themes provided a clear framework for coding, allowing me to develop relevant codes, group similar codes together, and refine them into sub-themes and emerging themes. Table 6.6 presents the themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis. For ethical considerations, participants' identities were anonymised, and each participant was assigned a unique codename (see Table 6.7).

Themes	Sub-themes (emerging)
General definition of bản sắc	National identity
	Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT)
	Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN)
Definition of teachers' bản sắc	National identity
	Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT)
	Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN)
	Bản
The temporal domain	
The social domain	
The spatial domain	Socialist values

	Traditional values
	Social hierarchy
	The typical bản
Influences of languages on bản sắc	Vietnamese
	English

Table 6.6: Themes and sub-themes in FDG data analysis (Translated from Vietnamese)

Pseudo nyms	Type of school	Subject	Was an interview participant?
Vũ	International school - Nationally established, not a chained school, Bilingual	Science	No
Hà	International school - Chained school, Bilingual	Vietnamese	Yes
Trang	Public school – Secondary	Physics	Yes
Phan	Public school - Secondary	ESL	Yes
Phuong	Public school – Primary	ESL	No

Table 6.7: The demographic of FDG participants

The FGD yielded valuable insights, bridging gaps identified in the interview data analysis. Notably, the discussion led to the emergence of a refined conceptual framework of bản sắc (see [Chapter 7](#)). This framework was particularly significant as it was co-constructed by Vietnamese teachers themselves, ensuring its alignment with their lived experiences. Based on this new conceptualisation, I revisited the interview data for a second round of analysis, cross-referencing findings from both data sets. For instance, upon identifying the theme of bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) in the FGD, I re-examined the interview transcripts to locate relevant supporting quotes. Additionally, the analysis of the FGD data prompted the identification of new themes within the interview data that had not initially been apparent. For example, the national identity in the social domain and incomes disparity in the spatial domain emerged in the public school teacher group (see Table 6.8). For international school teachers, codes reflecting Vietnamese collectivist values were grouped together,

while those representing values not rooted in collectivist traditions were categorized separately to form distinct subthemes (see Table 6.9). The refined thematic framework informed the final findings regarding the bản sắc of public and international school teachers. For international school teachers, some codes were modified or expanded as new sub-themes emerged, further enriching the analysis.

Themes	Emerging sub-themes
The social domain	The national identity
The spatial domain	Subject hierarchy
	Incomes disparities
	Private tutoring (shadow education)
	Changes in societies in relation to changes in bản sắc

Table 6.8: Emerging themes from interview data set from cross-checking - Public school teachers

Themes	Emerging sub-themes	Modified/ new codes
The social domain	Individualist Western values	Relationship with students
		Relationship with school leaders
		Curriculum
		English language
	Vietnamese social values	Curriculum
		Relationship with students
		Vietnamese language
	Cultural hierarchy	Income disparities
		English as standardised language
		Favoured Western epistemological knowledge
		Internalisation

The spatial domain	Connection between the school and the local community	School policies
		The state interference
	Ambiguity in bản sắc	

Table 6.9: Emerging themes from interview data set from cross-checking - International school teachers

After analysing the FDG and conducting a second round of interview data analysis, several areas requiring further investigation were identified for school observations. First, the organisational structures of international schools appeared to vary significantly. Therefore, the observation aimed to examine how the selected international school operated in practice. Second, the intertwining of the spatial and social domains required further exploration for both groups of participants. Specifically, the observation sought to understand how Vietnamese social values were reflected in the public school setting and how both Vietnamese and Western values coexisted within the international school. Additionally, observing teachers' interactions with key stakeholders – including students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents – served as a means of cross-checking whether the realities I interpreted aligned with the teachers' own accounts.

6.5.4 School observation

The selection of schools and the schools' background

School selections

Before reaching out to schools for permission, I carefully mapped potential public and international schools based on specific criteria. For public schools, the selection focused on primary, lower-secondary, or upper-secondary schools located in Ho Chi Minh City or nearby regions. This geographic consideration was based on the location of most interview and focus group participants. Choosing rural schools would have posed logistical challenges due to travel and accommodation costs. It could have also resulted in an incoherent dataset due to geographical differences between observation sites and interview locations. Accessibility was another crucial factor, as schools with connections to interview participants or my network were prioritised to facilitate easier entry. Based on these criteria, potential schools were identified from the list of public schools published by regional Departments of Education and Training (e.g., phongtccb.hcm.edu.vn, bariavungtau.edu.vn).

For international schools, selection criteria required that the school be officially registered with the Ministry of Education and Training to ensure research quality. The decision to include only officially registered schools stemmed from the prevalence of institutions that market themselves as “international” due to high demand but are not foreign invested (Tâm, 2024, Communist Party of Ho

Chi Minh City, 2019). Similar to the selection process for public schools, international schools had to be located in Ho Chi Minh City, as most well-established international schools in Vietnam are concentrated in major urban areas such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (Asia Education Review, 2024). I then identified potential international schools from the list published by the International School Data Base (international-schools-database.com)

At the end of the mapping process, three public schools and three international schools were shortlisted as potential research sites. I then initiated contact with school principals for access. Ultimately, access was successfully secured at one public primary school in Vung Tau and one international school in Ho Chi Minh City. For the public school, my prior enrolment as a student helped maintain a connection with a headteacher, who facilitated an introduction to the principal – the primary gatekeeper. For the international school, one of the focus group participants worked at one of the three shortlisted schools. As a subject coordinator and headteacher, he assisted in securing approval from the school principal.

This research adhered to ethical procedures in the social sciences, following the guidelines established for doctoral projects at Maynooth University (see [Appendix J](#) for ethics approval). Ethical considerations were thoroughly communicated to the school principals before the commencement of observations. The principals received and retained a copy of the research information and ethical concerns to ensure transparency and compliance with ethical standards (see [Appendix G](#)).

The public school background

The observed public school was recognised as a national standardised school, meeting the criteria outlined in policies (MOET, 2018b). These criteria covered five key areas: school organisation and management, leadership and staff qualifications, school facilities and teaching equipment, relationships with families and society, and educational activities and outcomes. Understanding these standards provided valuable context for the observations.

The school's organisation and management aligned with national Law on Education and the socio-economic development plans of the local region. It operated under a structured school board, regularly supervised and evaluated, and adhered to Vietnam Communist Party ideologies. The school was required to have a principal, vice-principals, subject-specialised teams, and an administrative structure in accordance with MOET regulations. It also needed to maintain a sufficient number of grades and classes and implement clear staff development and management plans.

Regarding staffing, all teachers were required to have professional qualifications (see [Chapter 2, section 2.5.2](#)), including a designated teacher responsible for the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers organisation. In terms of facilities, the school had essential infrastructure, including a school gate, signage, perimeter walls, a well-maintained campus, and a yard for physical education. Each class had its own homeroom with sufficient desks, chairs, lighting, electric fans, and storage. Additional spaces

included dedicated rooms for arts, computers, administration, Young Pioneers activities, and an annually updated library.

The school maintained strong relationships with families and the wider community through an active parent-representative board and coordination with the Communist Party committee, government authorities, and local organisations. Educational activities followed the national curriculum, with goals aligned to regional development plans. The school was required to support primary education universalisation, ensuring at least 90% of six-year-olds in the area entered Grade 1. Completion rates for the class program were set at a minimum of 70%, with at least 65% of 11-year-olds and 80% of children up to 14 years old completing primary education (MOET, 2018b).

The international school background

The observed international school had a unique background, as it was a part of a public university, whereas the majority of international schools in Vietnam are privately owned (see [Chapter 2, section 2.6](#)). The school maintained small class sizes, with only 13 students per class. It was a multi-level institution, educating students from Grade 1 to Grade 12. The learning structure was divided similarly to the Vietnamese national system: Primary (Grades 1 to 5), Lower-Secondary (Grades 6 to 9), and Upper-Secondary (Grades 10 to 12). The school offered two distinct programmes: the international programme, which followed the IB (International Baccalaureate) curriculum, and the bilingual programme, which integrated both the IB and Vietnam national curricula. The international programme was taught entirely in English, while the bilingual programme included some subjects taught in Vietnamese. Additionally, the school incorporated subjects from the host country's education system, such as home economics compulsory for all students from Grade 1 to Grade 9.

The school's leadership structure consisted of a Vietnamese director, a principal from the host country, a vice principal, academic coordinators, headteacher, homeroom teachers, subject teachers, teaching assistants, and administrative staff. The director oversaw the school's management responsibilities, while the principal and vice principal handled academic affairs. The number of Vietnamese and expatriate teachers appeared to be relatively equal.

Data collection

The observation was conducted over two full days at the public school and one day at the international school. A semi-structured observation approach was adopted, using predefined themes as guidelines (see Table 6.10). These themes were informed by the literature, conceptual framework, and data gaps identified during phase two of data analysis. For example, through the analysis of FGD and interview data, the organisational structures of international schools appeared unclear compared to

public schools. Therefore, the observation guidelines included the organisations of both public and international schools. My positionality was also crucial during the observation as it enabled the recognition of Vietnamese traditional values and Western influences. During observation, I noted down the overlapping themes. For instance, at the public school, the social hierarchy overlapped with teachers' interaction with students. These overlaps were particularly significant as they contributed to the data analysis. Additionally, any emerging themes were recorded in the fieldnotes.

Themes	Guidelines
Teacher's interaction with stakeholders	- Interaction with students - Interaction with colleagues - Interaction with school principal - Interaction with parents
Teachers in the classroom	- The classroom atmosphere/ climate - Interaction with students during the study periods - How teachers structure the study periods - How teachers organise classroom activities
Organisation of the school	- Layout of the classrooms and the whole school - Layout of the staff room(s) - Curricula - Activities organised - Whole school atmosphere/ climate
Vietnamese social values (as informed by literature, the researcher's positionality, and data analysis of phase 2)	- Social hierarchy - Social harmony (group-based values) - Vietnamese language (verbal and non-verbal) - The national identity
Western values (only for the international school, informed by literature and data analysis of phase 2)	- Cultural hierarchy - English language - Education philosophy

Other areas of interest to
note

Table 6.10: School observation guidelines

I positioned herself as an outsider, aiming for minimal interference in the observed environment, apart from occasional informal conversations with teachers. Observations took place in classrooms during the study periods with teachers' permission, as well as in other areas of the school during whole-school activities (at the public school) and break times. Teachers were also observed in the staffroom, though at both schools, they were rarely present in this space. Informal conversations with teachers during break times provided valuable insights into school organisation, including study periods, curricula, and teachers' workloads. Initially, the observation aimed to include staff meetings and teacher-parent interactions. However, no staff meetings took place on the observation day(s), and minimal teacher-parent interactions were recorded.

Throughout and after each observation session, I took both reflective and descriptive field notes, all hand-written in Vietnamese and occasionally in English. These notes were then transferred to an electronic copy for checking with the school principals (see [Appendix L](#)). However, due to the busy schedule of the international school principal, data was checked with a head teacher/ academic coordinator who assisted the fieldtrip. The fieldnotes also contained my hand-drawn sketches, depicting school layouts, classroom arrangements, and staffrooms (see [Appendix K](#)). These sketches later guided the selection of illustrative images from Google for use in the findings chapters ([Chapters 8 and 9](#)). For ethical reasons, any data involving students were erased. Additionally, I attempted to maintain a neutral stance by carefully listening and documenting observations objectively, ensuring that personal biases did not influence data collection.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis in was a straightforward process as themes were facilitated by the observation guidelines. I then revisited the FGD and interview data sets for cross-checking, leading to the reorganisation of themes and sub-themes and the finalisation of findings. For instance, observations of teachers' interactions students, colleagues, and school leaders in public schools helped identify the Vietnamese value system underlying these interactions, thus the intertwining of the social and spatial domains. Moreover, based on my positionality, sub-themes were refined. For example, observing younger teachers interact with older teachers using hierarchical pronouns and honorifics, my positionality helped identify that interaction as Vietnamese social hierarchy. Similarly, observations at the international school allowed for a comparison between Vietnamese traditions and Western influences, including teachers' interactions with students, colleagues, and school leaders,

school's educational philosophy, classroom layout, and curricula. Additionally, the analysis and cross-checking revealed that the temporal domain emerged as a dimension embedded within both social and spatial domains, shaping their key elements. For example, public school teachers had been exposed to social hierarchy since childhood within their families and continued to reinforce these structures in their work environment (see [Chapter 8](#)). Since the temporal domain intersected with multiple themes, it was not treated as a separate theme in the findings discussion. The final themes and sub-themes informed the structure of the findings chapters (see Table 6.11).

Chapter	Themes	Sub-themes
Bản sắc as conceptualised by teachers (Chapter 7)	Defining bản sắc of teachers	Bản sắc dân tộc (national identity)
		Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT)
		Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN)
		Bản
	Bản sắc in three domains	Temporal - Bản sắc is fluid
		Social - Bản sắc is social
		Spatial - Bản sắc is unique to Vietnamese society; The typical bản (societal expectation)
Bản sắc of public school teachers (Chapter 8)	Bản sắc in the work environment (social domain)	National identity
		Social harmony
		Social hierarchy
		Moral education
		Traditional customs
	Bản sắc in the society (spatial domain)	Social role/ status
		Incomes
		Changes
Bản sắc of international	Bản sắc in the work	Vietnamese traditions (collectivist

school teachers (Chapter 9)	environment (social domain)	values and socialism)
		Western influences (individualism, English)
		Cultural hierarchies
	Bản sắc in the society (spatial domain)	The connection between the work environment and wider society
		Societal roles and standing
		Hybrid bản sắc

Table 6.11: Final themes and sub-themes informed by observation analysis and cross-checking

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach, theoretical foundation, conceptual framework, and research methods employed in this research. Situated in the interpretivist paradigm, the study adopts a relativist ontology and a relational epistemology to explore teachers' bản sắc – a culturally embedded concept of identity. The theoretical framework combines postcolonial theory and socio-constructivist perspectives, allowing for a nuanced understanding of identity that acknowledges both societal influences and the agency of individuals as well as fostering the “ecologies of knowledge” (Santos, 2015) where Western and Vietnamese onto-epistemologies coexist.

Postcolonial theory informs the decolonial approach of the study, challenging dominant Western epistemologies and legitimising bản sắc as a locally grounded and culturally rich research concept. Meanwhile, socio-constructivist theories contribute to the conceptualisation of bản sắc through temporal, social, and spatial domains, enabling a layered exploration of the self as both independent and interdependent.

The adoption of a comparative qualitative methodology, comprising one-to-one interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, allows for the collection of in-depth, context-grounded data across different educational settings. This approach not only facilitates a holistic understanding of participants' experiences but also supports the refinement of emerging themes, ensuring a coherent emergence of bản sắc across data sets.

Importantly, my positionality plays an important role in the theoretical commitment, data collection, and data analysis. The insider position informed the comparative methodology and critical engagement with theories. It further enabled a selective, critical, and contextually sensitive use of Western frameworks while grounding the concept of bản sắc in local epistemology. It also fostered a

deep engagement with participants and data interpretation with sensitivity to sociocultural nuances, while the outsider position allowed for openness and reflexivity. My linguistic fluency also ensured the authenticity of participants' voices and authentic interpretation of culturally embedded concepts. Aware of limitations and taking measurements for mitigation, my positionality enhanced the rigour, cultural resonance, and decolonial approach of the research.

The conceptual framework and methodology presented in this chapter serve as an analytical lens for the subsequent chapters. Socio-constructivist theories on identities are used to interpret the empirical data, highlighting how bản sắc is shaped by the interplay between the temporal, social, and spatial domain with the dynamic of collective and individual identities (see [Chapter 7](#)). Chapters [Chapter 8](#) and [9](#) demonstrate how teachers navigate and negotiate their bản sắc in the work environment (the social domain) and in Vietnamese society (the spatial domain) over time (the temporal domain). These chapters draw attention to both shared and divergent teachers' experiences across the two school settings, which are further discussed in relation to the national education landscape in [Chapter 10](#).

Chapter 7: Bản sắc as Conceptualised by Teachers

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how teachers from both public and international schools collectively understand and conceptualise bản sắc. Drawing from the literature about societies and self-construals in [Chapter 3](#), the conceptual framework, and data discussed in [Chapter 6](#), this chapter develops a culturally grounded conceptual framework of bản sắc rooted in participants' lived experiences.

The chapter is structured into two main sections. [Section 7.2](#) discusses the multi-layered nature of bản sắc, including national identity, bản sắc tập thể (BSTT), bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), and bản. [Section 7.3](#) discusses bản sắc in three domains: temporal domain encompassing the past, present, and future; social domain – the work environment including interactions with students, colleagues, and school leaders; spatial domain – bản sắc in Vietnamese society, including socialist principles, traditional values, social hierarchies, and societal expectations.

The chapter concludes by synthesising key concepts of bản sắc, laying the foundation for discussion on bản sắc of each group of teachers in the subsequent chapters. As this chapter introduces key concepts of bản sắc in Vietnamese language followed by their English translations, a brief explanation of the acronyms is as follows:

BSTT: Bản sắc tập thể signifying collective identity.

BSCN: Bản sắc cá nhân signifying individual identity.

Bản: The anchoring self/ inner sense of self.

7.2 Bản sắc is multi-layered

This section examines teachers' conceptualisations of bản sắc in dialogue with the conceptual framework (see [Chapter 6](#)), with the aim of developing a coherent model that integrates existing theories with participants' narratives. It adopts a decolonial approach that fosters epistemic pluralism and values knowledge traditions beyond the Western contexts.

Focus group participants collectively pointed out that bản sắc is a broad and nuanced concept, composed of two components: bản and sắc. According to them, “bản” originates from the word “bản chất” (nature or essence), signifying core values and inner orientation. In contrast, “sắc” was associated with “màu sắc” (colour), denoting distinctiveness, beauty, and external expression. Hà – an international school teacher – elaborated that bản conveys the inner foundation of a person or collective, while sắc represents the outer qualities – the interesting, aesthetic, or culturally expressive aspects. Together, bản sắc was described as the unique and beautiful characteristics of an individual or group, underpinned by core values but also open for adaptation and negotiation.

Participants approached the concept of bản sắc by discussing *bản sắc dân tộc* (national identity). As Hà noted, “*Bản sắc dân tộc describes the beautiful characteristics of a nation and its core values.*” They further emphasised that beside the national identity, bản sắc can refer to both collectives (*bản sắc tập thể*³) and individuals (*bản sắc cá nhân*⁴). Importantly, participants highlighted the interdependence between the two: bản sắc of an individual is complex because it encompasses bản sắc of the collective, associated with the social groups to which a person belongs. While bản sắc can both signify the collective and individual identity, participants emphasised that these are not separate but interdependent.

Participants further conceptualised bản sắc as a multi-layered construct. The outer layers consist of national identity and bản sắc tập thể (BSTT), providing collective belonging and normative shaping of bản sắc. These layers inform, but does not completely determine, bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), which distinguishes an individual from the collective and allows for negotiation, interpretation and even resistance of the collective shaping. Over time, filtered values from multiple layers are integrated into bản.

Given the complexity and cultural specificity of bản sắc, Vietnamese terms – *bản sắc tập thể* (BSTT), *bản sắc cá nhân* (BSCN), and *bản* – are retained throughout the thesis – to reflect participants’ authentic understanding of bản sắc rooted in Vietnamese epistemologies. These Vietnamese terms are then made sense by participants’ explanations, the conceptual framework, and existing theories.

7.2.1 The outer layers – collective identity

Participants placed strong emphasis on bản sắc dân tộc (national identity) and bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) as outer layers, signifying collective identity. They believed that bản sắc of an individual encompasses the bản sắc of collectives or social groups, ultimately connecting to the shared identity of the nation. Vũ – an international school teacher – said, “*When talking about bản sắc, first of all, bản sắc describes something broad, such as a collective community. An individual’s bản sắc is a part of bản sắc of the collective (tập thể).*” This reflects the prominence of the interdependent self-construal in Vietnamese collectivist society, where identity is grounded in inter-personal relationship, group-based values, and shared cultural expectations (Markus and Kitayama, 1998).

The national identity

³ “Tập thể” in Vietnamese refers to a “collective” (group or a community).

⁴ “Cá nhân” in Vietnamese refers to an “individual”.

Vietnamese national identity is perceived as the outermost layer in bản sắc because it encompasses and influences various other social groups within Vietnamese society, such as family, peer groups, place of residence, and ethnic communities. As Vũ elaborated:

For example, when exposed to another culture, it is common to hear people talk about the need to show bản sắc of Vietnamese people. It means our bản sắc aligns with bản sắc of all Vietnamese people.

Vũ's narrative demonstrates that the national identity is interwoven with Vietnamese culture and understood as the most expansive layer of bản sắc, providing a shared identity in the nation. This understanding aligns with Minh Chi (2007) who argues that bản sắc of Vietnamese people is constructed by Vietnamese national identity, comprising enduring values that distinguish Vietnamese people from others. From this perspective, individuals develop a sense of self through belonging to a national community (i.e., being Vietnamese), often in contrast to other national groups (i.e., not being Vietnamese) – a process central to the construction of the collective self (Spear, 2015). Vũ's emphasis on a shared national identity, “our bản sắc is a part of bản sắc of all Vietnamese people”, reflects this alignment, portraying national identity as a unifying constitution of bản sắc. This notion echoes Vietnamese collectivism where the perception of one's self is embedded in the society (see [Chapter 3](#)).

The emphasis on national identity also reflects the socialist principles of Vietnam. Vietnamese socialism is deeply embedded in the spiritual and ethical fabric of the nation (Nhưng and Nghia, 2024). Vietnam Communist Party viewed the national identity as a foundation of Vietnamese society (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014), shaping individuals' values (Nhưng and Nghia, 2024; Phan, 2010). In the socialist framework, the indoctrination of national identity at public school (see [Chapter 8](#)) reflects ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014). This mean, public schooling often promotes a collective way of understanding bản sắc, positioning teachers as both transmitter and embodiment of socialist values, leaving little space for resistance. Reform policies' emphasis on the preservation of national identity is further discussed in [Chapter 10](#) in relation to the broader education landscape.

However, while participants implied national identity as the outmost expansive and rigid layer, the conceptual framework suggests that national identity should not be seen as a fixed boundary but as a fluid and negotiated construction of bản sắc. In the temporal domain, Vietnamese national identity is inseparable from the Vietnamese culture and is the result of ongoing exchange and selective absorption from multiple civilisation throughout history (Phan, 2010). In the spatial domain, national identity could interact with cultural traditions, global influences, and teachers' multi-membership across communities (Wenger, 1999). For instance, when teachers move in and out of their work environment, or engage with global educational discourses, their national identity is reinterpreted in relation to various forms of membership. Therefore, even within the socialist and

collectivist framework, Vietnamese national identity is not as an immutable layer, but as a broader shaping of self that evolves across time, social groups, and social contexts.

Thus, integrating both participants' narratives and the conceptual framework, I argue that this outermost layer is not fixed or rigid. Rather, it simultaneously functions as a collective understanding of *bản sắc* and is interpreted by teachers' lived experiences. Teachers' *bản sắc* is both embedded in national identity reflecting Vietnamese socialism and collectivism; and constantly redefined across multiple social groups, across the temporal, social and spatial domain. As stated by Hà, "*Although we are all Vietnamese, our bản sắc is not the same*". This variation is explored further in relation to *bản sắc* of public school teachers ([Chapter 8](#)) and international school teachers ([Chapter 9](#)).

Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT)

According to focus group participants, the term "*bản sắc*" is rarely used to describe an individual's identity. Rather, it is often used to refer to the identity of a collective. Vũ – an international school teacher – explained, "*When talking about bản sắc, first of all, bản sắc describes something broad, such as a collective community. And individuals' bản sắc is a part of bản sắc of the collective community (tập thể)*". This understanding positions BSTT as the outer layers of *bản sắc*, reflecting shared identity through engagement in various social group. BSTT is shaped by individuals' memberships in various social groups, such as family, professional affiliations, and geographic communities.

While national identity is perceived as the outermost layer that foster a shared identity of Vietnamese people, BSTT represents the various overlapping and non-overlapping social group memberships that shape how teachers understand who they are in social contexts. This perception echoes the interdependent self-construal (Markus and Kitayama, 1998) where the self is shaped through connection and belonging within a social group. According to Phan – a public school teacher, social groups can range from large-scale identifiers, such as residing in a capital city, to smaller, specific affiliations, such as being a teacher or belonging to a professional network. Hà – an international school teacher elaborated, "*Bản sắc consists of our background, our education journey, our experiences, our relation with others around us, and the social contexts that we are in*". She further added "*To understand an individual's bản sắc, it is essential to go from layer to layer and dissect them.*" In this quote, the word "layer" is translated from "lớp" which contains double meanings. "Lớp" could be understood as "slice" implying distinct, non-overlapping parts. It can also be understood as "layer" – without overlapping dynamics. These dual meaning highlights that while some social groups may intersect while others remain separate.

Teachers also suggested that through various social groups' memberships, BSTT distinguish one Vietnamese individual from another, challenging the assumption of rigid national identity. As Hà noted, "*Although we are all Vietnamese, our bản sắc is not the same.*" Focus group participants

further collectively pointed out that a sense of belonging is essential for perceiving, realising, and identifying bản sắc, consistent with Hogg's (2015) social categorisation. Through social categorisation theory, individuals are mentally grouped with prototypes that highlight similarities within the group and distinguish the group from others (Ibid.). As a result, individuals develop a sense of belonging and a shared identity while maintaining distinctions between overlapping or non-overlapping social groups. These reflections also echo Wenger's (1999) identity development through participation and engagement in communities of practice. Erikson (1994) similarly highlights the role of social groups in identity development, arguing that individuals must negotiate and integrate the values and expectations of their cultural and social environments to develop a coherent sense of self. This means, in every social group an individual is a part of, she/he has a self that is shaped by and aligns with the collective values of the social groups. These multiple selves (both overlapping and non-overlapping) together formed a layer in bản sắc which participants called *bản sắc tập thể* (BSTT). Additionally, teachers also described BSTT as a normative mechanism that regulates behaviours in social contexts. Vũ noted that individuals often act the norms and expectations of the groups they belong to and engage with at a given time, aligning with Mead's (1934) concept of "Me". The "Me" represents the socially reflective aspect of the self, shaped by community attitudes and norms. It functions as a regulatory mechanism, ensuring socially appropriate behaviour. This perception elaborates on why, despite a shared national identity, participants in this research believed their bản sắc differed.

Notably, participants perceived 'being a teacher' as one social group in BSTT, but one that extends beyond a profession into a societal role in the collectivist and socialist Vietnam. This societal role adds complexity to teachers' bản sắc as it suggests that their bản sắc is not merely limited inside one social group but extended to the wider society and other social groups. Anchored in the conceptual framework, within the social domain, BSTT is continuously shaped through interaction and relationship with students, colleagues, school leaders, and students' parents. At the same time, they are embedded in the temporal domain, as teachers' past group memberships (e.g., upbringing, family, childhood) and future aspirations (e.g., ambitions, future goals) could have implications on how they perceive themselves in the present. Moreover, situated in the temporal domain which demonstrate changes, collective values of social groups could also shift and cause changes in BSTT. The societal role of teachers further locates BSTT in the spatial domain, as teachers' bản sắc is also shaped by Vietnamese traditional values and societal expectations. This notion is further discussed in [Section 7.3](#).

Through integration between the conceptual framework and teachers' narratives, BSTT can be understood as a layer in bản sắc that consists of various social group memberships with which an individual identifies. These various groups provide values, norms, and expectations, fostering both shared identity within a group and individual differentiation from the broader national identity. It also

regulates behaviours to align with the collective norms. As collective norms and values could always evolve and so could BSTT, signifying its fluidity.

7.2.2 The inner layers – individual identity

Within the multi-layered conceptualisation of bản sắc, bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN) constitutes the inner layer that is both inseparable and distinguished from BSTT. While BSCN is shaped by navigation across various social groups within BSTT, it also possesses the capacity to resist or reinterpret collective values of a social group. It is through BSCN that an individual distinguishes her/himself from another, even within the same social group. In this sense, BSCN reflects the interplay between the independent and interdependent self-construal (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). However, unlike the independent self-construal that is characterised by autonomy, internal consistency, and self-sufficiency (Ibid.), BSCN is informed by BSTT and resist this shaping simultaneously. Overtime, the values negotiated within BSCN filter down to form bản – the innermost layer that filters and internalises aspects of all outer layers across the temporal, social, and spatial domains.

Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN) is informed by bản sắc tập thể (BSTT)

Focus group participants described BSCN as both unique and relational. While BSTT encompasses various social groups an individual engages in, BSCN further distinguishes one person from another since no individuals' social groups are identical. This means no individuals' negotiation of meaning across various social groups are the same. Vũ explained that BSCN therefore includes one's unique shaping, which determines how individuals respond differently to the social world. This notion aligns with Mead's (1934) concept of "I." Mead described the "I" as the spontaneous, impulsive, and innovative aspect of the self, acting without overthinking societal norms. It is the seat of individuality, embodying personal desires and original actions. While the "Me" represents the socially reflective self – shaped by societal norms and group expectations, the "I" responds to these norms, challenging or redefining them (Mead, 1934). This interplay between the "I" and the "Me" was evident in participants' reflections. For example, Bình – a public school teacher – noted during the interview, "*Society expects teachers to dress formally as a standard for teachers. I don't think those 'standards' fit me.*" His narrative demonstrates how BSCN can interpret the collective norms. Yet, in Vietnamese collective society, the idea of selfhood is not fixed but validated via group values, interpersonal relationships, and the prioritisation of social harmony (see Chapter 3, subsection 3.4.1). Thus, the interpretation of collective norms does not occur on the basis of individualistic autonomy. This means BSCN is not simply a manifestation of an entirely autonomous agent, but one whose expressions of individual identity are shaped, validated, or even constrained by the "We".

The conceptual framework helps explain this process across domains. In the temporal domain, Bình's upbringing in the past or future aspirations to redefine social norms for younger teacher generations may have informed his resistance to dress code in the present. In the spatial domain, his view on teacher dress standards may have been shaped by participation and engagement in other social groups that valued comfort over formality, demonstrating how BSCN remains embedded in and informed by BSTT. This notion aligns with Wenger's concept of multi-membership, whereby individuals navigate and reconcile values across different communities of practice (1999).

Hà further highlighted how BSCN is inseparable from BSTT:

I am Vietnamese, but I am also educated, I also speak English. And there are many more lớp (layers/ slices) in me. And once we go through all these layers/ slices, we will be able to understand our bản sắc.

Viewed through the conceptual framework and teachers' reflections, BSCN embodies the individual identity as both agency and embeddedness. It can be understood as not fixed but a dynamic layer shaped through navigation among social groups across the temporal, social, and spatial domains. It distinguishes one teacher from another, yet it never wholly detached from their BSTT. BSCN enables teachers to respond to, and at times, even resist collective norms. BSCN could also shift when BSTT evolves. This dynamic is further discussed in [subsection 7.3.1](#).

Bản

Focus group participants conceptualised bản as the innermost layer of bản sắc, adding complexity to the initial framework (see [Chapter 6, subsection 6.3.2](#)). While bản was originally theorised by the independent and/or interdependent self-construals (Markus and Kitayama, 1998), the interplay between these self-construals remained unclear. Participants clarified this conceptual gap by articulating bản as a distilled part of bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), that, in negotiation with bản sắc tập thể (BSTT), becomes internalised over time. This means, bản is not a separate or pre-defined self but an outcome of continuous filtering, where outer layers are absorbed and integrated into the inner self.

Vũ explained bản by emphasising the stability:

Bản is something at the core of an individual; it is stable and tends to be unchanged. No matter the social context or which social groups I belong to, I always base my decisions on the bản in my bản sắc. At some point, we always return to our bản.

This reflection positions bản as an internal compass that guide behaviour across shifting social contexts, aligning with Sedikides and Gaertner's (2015) notion of the stable home-based self – the inner self that persists across shifting social roles and group affiliations. While individuals may immerse themselves in the norms and activities of a group, they often return to this stable self when making significant decisions (Ibid.). However, unlike Sedikides and Gaertner's concept, which risks implying a static selfhood, participants described bản as something that is integrated through a

trickling-down process. Overtime, certain values, beliefs, and aspirations are filtered down from the national identity, BSTT, BSCN, and are then internalised, forming an anchoring point that individuals could rely on when navigating life's complexities. Interpreted through the conceptual framework, it is in the temporal and spatial domain that collectivist values, socialist principles, and even global influences are gradually internalised. This further locates *bản* in the wider Vietnamese society that transcend the workplace. In the social and spatial domain, *bản* could provide coherence sense of self for their multi-memberships (Wenger, 1999) when teachers move among various social groups (e.g., schools, family, professional networks) in the wider Vietnamese society.

Given that the Vietnamese national identity, BSTT, and BSCN have a fluidity and ability to shape and interpret one another, *bản* is not static by default but becomes an anchoring self through iterative processes of meaning-making, filtering, and internalisation across the temporal, social, and spatial domain. Furthermore, in Vietnamese collectivism where the "I" is dependent on the "We" (Dang, 2014), *bản* does not operate as isolated inner core but as the construct of relational embeddedness. It reflects how individuals sustain an inner sense of coherence while navigating the dynamic influences of the national identity and social group memberships. In doing so, *bản* is not simply a marker of stability but an inner compass, where values instil, evolve, and sometimes push back against societal norms. Vũ highlighted this function, "*it is more likely that we base on our bản to evaluate the working environment*". Thus, *bản* serves as a point of reference through which individuals evaluate their social contexts, enabling continuity within change.

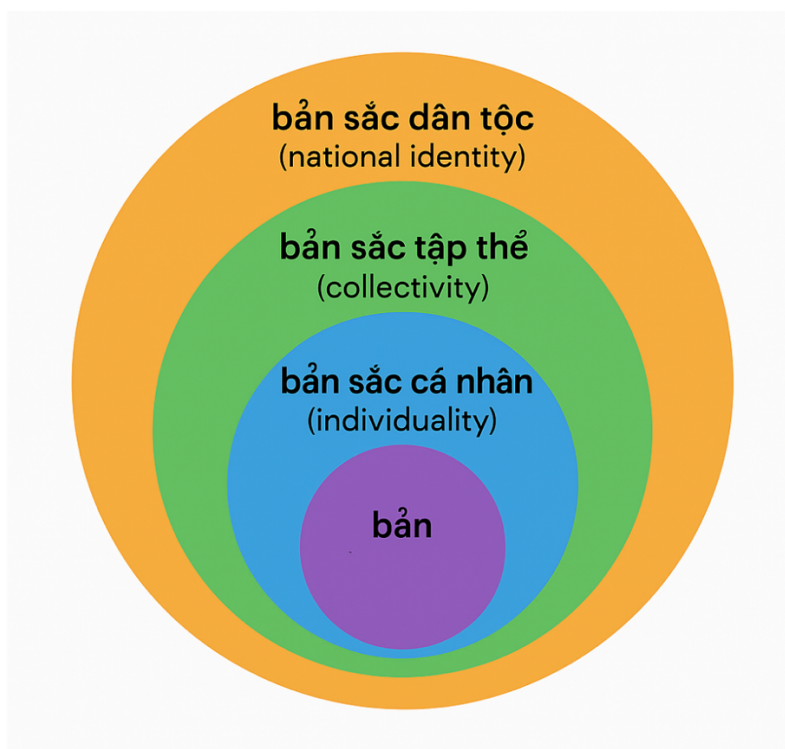


Figure 7.1: Research participants' conceptualisation of bản sắc⁵

Initially, this study conceptualised bản sắc through bản (the independent and interdependent self-construals) across three domains – the temporal, social, and spatial. This framework was theorised based on the internal (bản) and external (sắc) aspects of selfhood. Research participants added complexity to this framework by grounding it in Vietnamese collectivism and socialism, where identity is understood primarily from the collective (“We”) rather than the individual (“I”) perspective. Teachers’ narratives emphasised the collective identity through national identity and BSTT, which inform individual identity – BSCN and bản (see Figure 7.1). In this sense, bản sắc is multi-layered with outer layers informing the inner while the inner interpreting this shaping. This construct reflects the dynamic interplay between societal norms, social group memberships, and personal agency, positioning bản sắc as both normative and performative. The filtering-down process across layers suggests that individuals integrate, negotiate and reinterpret different values throughout the course of their lives, shaping a unique yet socially embedded sense of self.

Such conceptualisation diverges from dominant teacher identity frameworks that focus on professional identity (e.g., Beijaard et al., 2004; Edwards, 2015; Salokangas and Wermke, 2020). Framing teachers’ identity solely in professional terms risks limiting their sense of self within the institutional work environment. Meanwhile, the concept of bản sắc foregrounds the collectivist understanding of identity. Vietnamese teachers in this research did not perceive their identity through a liberal lens that centres individual agency, but through a cultural perspective in which an individual is inseparable from the collective. For example, being part of a respected social group, such as the

⁵ Various social groups within BSTT are not depicted in this diagram.

teaching profession, brings with it implicit societal expectations. To maintain group harmony, teachers often act in accordance with collective norms, even when those norms conflict with their personal preferences (see [Chapter 8](#)). Yet, within bản sắc, there exist the capacity to interpret, internalise, and even resist collective norms. This capacity, however, does not represent liberal autonomy but rather a form of relational agency embedded within the collective.

Notably, Vietnamese teachers in this study collectively affirmed that the layers of bản sắc are not constructed in isolation but are shaped and understood across three interrelated domains: temporal, social, and spatial (see Figure 6.2). Within each domain and across domains, the dynamic interplay between layers is evident. The next section explores these domains in depth to further highlight the multi-layered construction of teachers' bản sắc.

7.3 Teachers' bản sắc in three domains

According to the conceptual framework of bản sắc discussed in [Section 7.2](#), teachers' bản sắc is multi-layered, encompassing collective and individual identity – bản sắc dân tộc (national identity), bản sắc tập thể (BSTT), bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), and bản. Participants consistently identified 'being a teacher' as a significant social group within their BSTT. For instance, Bình's BSTT might include various social groups such as family, friend groups, living in Hanoi, *being a teacher*, being a former student of the University of Education, etc. According to participants, teachers' bản sắc is primarily grounded in collective identity of 'being a teacher'. Meanwhile, a teacher's BSCN refers to her/his individual distinctiveness, reflecting differentiated meaning-making processes across social groups. As Phương said, "*Although we are all teachers, one teacher's bản sắc is different from another's*". However, given the dynamic between BSCN and BSTT discussed in the previous section, a teacher's BSCN is not separated from their BSTT.

The layers of bản sắc is further constructed in three domain – temporal, social, and spatial. Within and across these domains, the different layers interact dynamically. It is also through these domains that teachers understand their bản sắc as both normative – shaped by collective norms, expectations; and performative – enacted through their daily practices and meaning-making.

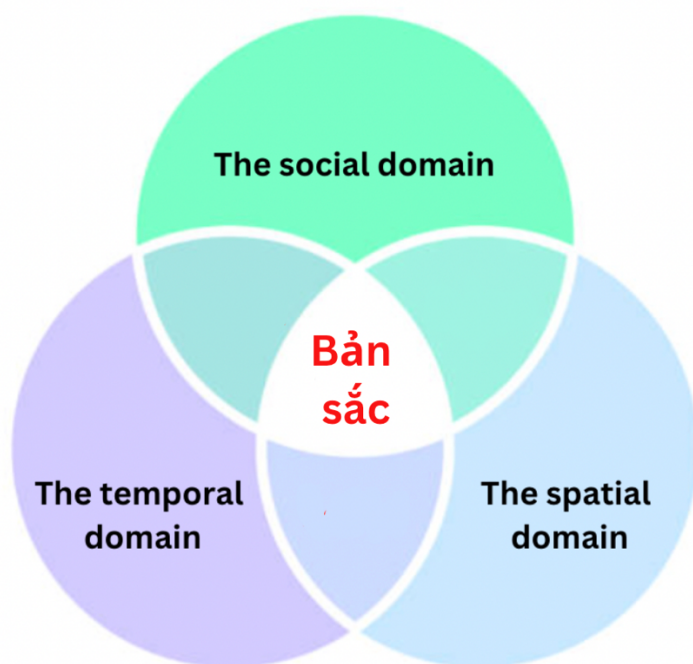


Figure 6.4: The conceptualisation of bản sắc in three domains (from Chapter 6)

7.3.1 Bản sắc is fluid: The temporal domain

In this domain, bản sắc is constructed by *childhood, upbringing, family, education journey, personal love life, future goals, ambitions, beliefs, and income*. It is also through these elements teachers understood and perceive their bản sắc throughout the past, present, and projected future. For example, “*income*” constructed bản sắc in the temporal domain as participants recalled how they envisioned their ideal income before becoming a teacher. Phan remarked:

I associate income with time - temporal domain - because since I was little and during the time I was growing up, I had expectations of how much money I wished to make. Now I compare my salary with other teachers to see if what I’m paid matches the amount of my work.

Similarly, Hà – an international school teacher – shared during the interview:

Income was my biggest worry when I chose to become a teacher. Actually, in high school, even my most respected teachers said, ‘You shouldn’t pursue a teaching career because the income is not high.’ Now, luckily, my income is higher than what I expected, higher than my mom’s, who is a public school teacher.

This aligns with Wenger’s (1999) concept of three trajectories: past experiences, present experiences, and the imagined future. These trajectories shape the ongoing process of negotiation, through which identity is formed (Ibid.). For example, in the past, Phan had specific expectations about his future income as a teacher which shaped the future he imagined for himself. If his current

income aligns with those past expectations, the imagined future becomes part of his present reality. Conversely, if his current income falls short of what he had expected, the imagined future remains unfulfilled. Regardless of whether the imagined future materialises, Phan's identity is continuously formed and transformed through the interplay among the past experiences, imagined future, and present experiences. In the example of Hà, the concern about income is simultaneously her present experiences in the past and past experiences at the present. They constituted her imagined future – being low-paid, which caused her anxiety in the past (the present experience in the past). Given her current income is higher than expected, her imagined future did not materialise, causing alternative present experiences – no longer concern about income. In both examples, through the navigation across these three trajectories, teachers' bản sắc is continuously transformed. These examples illustrate the dynamic among past experiences, present experiences, and imagined futures, which always evolve and transform into one another (Wenger, 1999). This suggests that bản sắc is fluid and therefore constantly evolves.

The elements of *childhood*, *upbringing*, *family*, *education journey*, and *ambitions* underscore that past experiences define the present and shape aspirations for the future. For instance, *childhood* is not merely a historical period but a formative element of one's current identity. Similarly, *beliefs* are constructed through time and continuously influenced by social interactions, demonstrating the evolving nature of bản sắc.

This domain not only signifies the fluidity of teachers' bản sắc but also the dynamic between BSTT and BSCN. Family – a social group in BSTT, for example, plays a part in forming BSTT of teachers. During the interview, Hà said:

My reason for becoming a teacher comes from my family. I grew up in a family with a teaching tradition; my grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts are all teachers, and they would be very happy if I could follow the tradition.

Familial influence reflects the values of collective societies, where interdependence is emphasised over individual autonomy (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). In such societies, achievements often serve to strengthen interconnectedness and fulfil familial or communal expectations rather than personal independence. However, as teachers belong to diverse social groups and engage in various interactions throughout their lives, the social groups' influences on each teacher as well as their meaning-making processes across social groups may differ from others. For some, familial influence may be stronger, while for others, it may be less pronounced. This notion reinforces teachers' narratives on the distinctiveness of BSCN which is informed by BSTT.

It is also evident that in the temporal domain, BSTT of teachers has caused changes to their BSCN. Change in BSCN are evident in how teachers act and are perceived in other social groups. For instance, Minh – an international school teacher – said, “*My friends told me I've become more difficult*”. In this quote, the word “difficult” was translated from the Vietnamese term “khó tính”. When a person is “khó tính”, it means they have high standards for work or relationships, making it

hard for others to please them. This example affirms that bản sắc is not a fixed state but is always evolving as teachers constantly negotiate meanings across social groups. In this sense, they can bring one shaping from one social group to another in the process of forming BSCN. The evolving nature of bản sắc aligns with data from individual interviews:

This is an interesting nature of the teaching profession, the more we teach, the more skilful and knowledgeable we are (Hương – an international school teacher).

I think the most significant formation is my confidence. I'm much more confident now compared to myself six years ago (Vinh - a public school teacher).

Notably, in this domain, teachers believed their bản was developed prior to becoming a teacher. Vũ said, “*Actually, our bản was developed before we became teachers, in the temporal domain and in our involvement in the society (being Vietnamese)*”. However, the conceptual framework (see [Section 7.2](#)) suggests that bản is not fixed before entry into the profession but continuously shaped through the trickling-down process, where values from different layers are gradually internalised. From this perspective, becoming a teacher adds ‘being a teacher’ as a significant social group within BSTT, which in turn feeds into and reshape bản. Thus, while participants viewed bản as largely formed by the past experiences in the temporal domain before entering the profession, the framework highlights its evolving nature that continues to develop across three trajectories: past, present, and future.

The temporal domain, therefore, posits teachers’ bản sắc as a fluid and evolving concept where the past experiences, present experiences, and the imagined future are intricate and continuously shaping one another. In this domain, the BSCN of each teacher is informed by their meaning-making processes across social groups including ‘being a teacher’ (i.e., family). Moreover, through time, their BSTT informs BSCN, which could influence teachers’ actions and perceptions in social groups (i.e., family, friend groups). This confirms the dynamic between BSTT and BSCN, constantly shaping and reshaping each other through time. This dynamic is also highlighted in teachers’ work environment – the social domain.

7.3.2 Bản sắc is social: The social domain

As aforementioned, ‘being teachers’ categorises teachers into a social group within BSTT. Therefore, in this domain, teachers’ bản sắc is constructed within their working environment, in the interactions with students, colleagues, school leaders, and teachers’ perception of the work environment. In the social domain, teachers believed their bản sắc is shaped by *the nature of the work environment (national vs international schools, public vs private schools), work culture, trust, communication among colleagues and managers, political stance of the school, beliefs, and incomes*. It is also through these elements they understood and perceive their bản sắc. These elements underscore the social dimension of teachers’ bản sắc, aligning with Mead’s (1934) concept of “Me” –

the socially constructed self that guides socially appropriate behaviour – and Gergen’s (1999) view of identity as a “relational being,” shaped through interactions and embedded within social networks.

Teachers’ experiences illustrate that *bản sắc* is not a fixed, singular characteristic, but continuously negotiated in social contexts. For instance, Phan shared that comparing salaries with colleagues within and across schools helped assess whether his income reflected his expertise and effort:

The social elements of my bản sắc also include income. I compare my income to other teachers’ to see if it reflects the amount of work I do or my expertise. I compare my income with colleagues in my school and also with those in other schools (Phan).

Such comparisons allowed participants to collectively address differences in payment between public and international school teachers during the FGD.

Beliefs and political stance also were identified as social elements of *bản sắc*. In the work environment, teachers express themselves in relation to how they perceive the beliefs and political stance of their students, colleagues, and school leaders. Phan explained, “*We always pay attention to the beliefs of others, such as our students, colleagues, and the school, because it affects how we teach*”. He further added:

I mean the political stance of our managers and colleagues influences how we express ourselves, including how we voice our opinions. And if our political stance conflicts with that of our colleagues, it would affect us indirectly. For example, we would try to hide a part of ourselves.

Phan’s reflections illustrate how teachers express themselves based on their perceptions of others, highlighting the relational and social nature of *bản sắc*. This aligns with Cooley’s (1902) “looking-glass self,” which posits that one acts and observes their action through the reaction of others. Similarly, Gergen (1999) conceptualises identity as a “relational being,” asserting that individuals exist within a network of relationships and that their identity is intricately linked to the connections they establish in social contexts. In Phan’s case, his decision to conceal aspects of himself when faced with conflicting political views demonstrates how *bản sắc* is constantly negotiated in response to the perceived social contexts.

Such relational behaviour was evident during the focus group discussion, where participants often prefaced their opinions with relational language, such as “*Similar to my colleague over here, I think ...*” (Trang).

The social domain also demonstrates an interplay between BSTT and BSCN. To elaborate on this interplay, I refer to the BSCN as “I” and the BSTT as “Me”, drawing from Mead (1934). As elaborated in the previous section, *bản sắc* emerges within a social context, where the “Me” internalises societal norms and dictates behaviour, while the “I”, shaped by other social groups, enables an individual to act against the “Me”. In social contexts, every person has responsibilities in a group as well as rights; he is a citizen and a part of the community, but he is also someone who

responds to the community and shapes it via his actions (Mead, 1934). In collective societies, however, the “I” is often suppressed, as individuals prioritise group harmony and adopt the “thou” perspective (Hsu, 1981; Triandis, 1995). Drawing from Phan’s example above, the “thou” perspective explains teachers’ tendency to compare themselves with others, express themselves in alignment with the perceived others, and are likely to “*try to hide a part of themselves*” to maintain social harmony. This phenomenon emphasises teachers’ performative aspect in the social domain is often regulated by BSTT rather than BSCN.

Nonetheless, conformity is not universal as BSCN of teachers varies from one another. It is not always the case that the teachers sacrifice the “I” for the “thou”. Phan illustrated this tension:

If our school leaders are corrupt, are we brave enough to oppose them or would we choose to be oppressed? Or if our colleagues are incorruptible but we are not, we would have to adjust ourselves. And if we are incorruptible while our colleagues are not, would we be affected and become corrupted? Some strong-minded people remained incorruptible, while some lost their morality.

The interplay between BSTT and BSCN in the social domain reflects nuance in bản sắc. While BSTT is grounded in group-oriented values and, in turn, inform BSCN, BSCN may resist this shaping. When tension arises, teachers may consistently go back to their bản, irrespective of the social groups they are involved with. Based on their bản, teachers are able to judge the nature of their schools and make the decision whether the working environment is suitable for them. Vũ further explained:

When we go to work, it is more likely that we base on our bản to evaluate the working environment rather than let the working environment shape us. We are always able to come back to our bản. That is why a lot of teachers changed their working environment after some time, some changed from the public sector to the private sector. That is because they have to return to their bản.

Notably, focus group participants believed that the nature of the work environment (i.e., international schools) had established a social group in BSTT of international school teachers besides ‘being a teacher’. This social group distinguishes international school teachers from their public school counterparts. Hà said:

My mom and I are both teachers and we come from the same background and same education. But I work in an international school while my mom works in a public school, so our social domains are different from each other. That’s why bản sắc of me and my mom’s are so different from each other.

Hà’s example aligns with Hogg (2015), who posits that individuals are socially classified, mentally grouped with the appropriate prototype. Therefore, identity is formed by social categories, which are imprecise collections of characteristics that highlight similarities among individuals within a group and differentiate that group from others (Hogg, 2015).

The social domain portrays the nuanced nature of teachers' bản sắc via the interplay of BSTT and BSCN. In the social interactions in their work environment, teachers can compare and reflect to decide on their actions. These actions are often regulated by BSTT to maintain group harmony. However, when tension arises, teachers are likely to rely on their bản in regulating behaviours. Moreover, the nature of the work environment also plays a part in social categorising teachers, adding a social group to BSTT of international school teachers.

The next subsection discusses how teachers' bản sắc is shaped in Vietnamese society – the spatial domain.

7.3.3 The concept of bản sắc is unique to Vietnamese society: The spatial domain

Phan – a public school teacher said, “*Being a teacher in Vietnam, mối quan hệ với xã hội (our engagement in Vietnamese society) does influence our bản sắc*”. This confirms the significance of the spatial domain in teachers' bản sắc. In this domain, teachers believed their bản sắc is shaped by *socialism, traditional values, social hierarchies, and societal expectations*. It is also through these elements they understood and perceive their bản sắc, consistent with theories of identity development in collective societies (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). These elements also echo Erikson's (1994) emphasis on the importance of social and cultural factors in shaping identity which argues that one must negotiate and integrate the values and expectations of their social and cultural environments in order to develop a coherent sense of self. The elements identified by research participants also reflect the prominence of Vietnamese national identity which consists of Vietnamese collectivism and socialist principles (see [Section 7.2](#)).

Socialist principles

Focus group participants highlighted that Vietnam's socialism strongly shapes teachers' bản sắc, as it underpins both the national education policy and teachers' work environment. Socialism is not only confined to Vietnamese society but are also embedded in the daily realities of teachers' workplaces, revealing the entwinement of the social and spatial domains. Trang said, “*In every public school, there is an existence of the Trade Union, the Communist Party Committee, the Cell of the Communist Party, as well as the Ministry of Education and Training*”. This quote reflects the deeply embedded, top-down administrative structure of Vietnamese public education, which is tightly interwoven with the broader political system led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) (see [Chapter 2, subsection 2.5.1](#)). The presence of socialism and its implications were also evident during the observation at the public school, which are further elaborated in [Chapter 8](#).

Although socialist principles were less pronounced in international schools, they were still present. Vũ noted, “*The international school I'm working at is a part of the public university, so there*

is the Communist Party Committee, the Cell of the Communist Party, and Ceremonies for Admission to the Communist Party". These accounts suggest that even in environments that outwardly promote international education models, the socialist principles exist, albeit with less intensity than in public schools. Focus group participants believed that this variation in the CPV's involvement contributes to differences in work environment between public and international schools, further diverging bản sắc of teachers in these settings. This divergence reinforces the argument that the work environment adds a social group to BSTT of international school teachers.

Furthermore, socialism is a key component of Vietnamese national identity, which forms the outermost layer of bản sắc, as detailed in the previous section. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), Vietnamese national identity is not merely cultural or historical – it is ideologically anchored in socialism, with Ho Chi Minh's ideologies serving as the moral and philosophical compass for national policies. Thus, socialism is not merely abstract political ideals. Instead, socialist principles lived, practised, and propagandised in schools. They shape institutional structures, professional standards for public school teachers (see [Chapter 2, section 2.5.2](#)), and consequently bản sắc of teachers themselves. Socialism, as a component of national identity, reinforces the notion that bản sắc is not a static or individually held attribute, but one forged in relation to the political system. Thus, when teachers internalise and practice socialist principles, they act as an instrument for cultural reproduction and reinforcement of ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014). However, the multi-layered construction and fluidity of bản sắc allows teachers to interpret the socialist principles. The ability to interpret socialist principles is evident in teachers' choice of work environment – the social domain, as Phương stated, *"In public schools, it is required that teachers must embrace socialism and teach them to the students. It might not be the case at international schools"*.

Traditional values for teachers

Both public and international school participants agreed that teachers occupy a highly esteemed position in Vietnamese society, a reflection of deep-rooted cultural traditions. As Hà noted, *"Vietnamese cultural values dignify the role of teachers. Teachers are highly respected. When we say someone in our family is a teacher, others will show respect"*. Her perception confirms the traditional values of Vietnam as written in a variety of folk verses and proverbs about the important role of teachers, such as *tôn sư trọng đạo* (highly respect the teachers and the knowledge), *Không thầy đố mày làm nên* (you can't succeed without your teachers), *Nhất tự vi sư, bán tự vi sư* (one is still your teacher even though they only teach you half a word). These proverbs reflect how deeply the teacher figure is embedded within the cultural consciousness. The Confucian influences further shape the prestige of teachers in Vietnamese society by the hierarchical order of "King-Teacher-Father" (Dung and Pereira, 2022). This arrangement signifies that the teacher precedes the father, so assuming a more significant role than the student's parents, if not the country's ruler (Ibid.).

This high value translates into social interactions and language that reinforce respect for teachers. Thỉnh – an international school teacher – said the student’s parents and older non-academic staff address him with honorifics. Several participants (Minh, Trung, Linh) shared the sentiment that “teacher” is no longer seen as merely a profession but as a respected title equal to Doctor, Professor, etc. Trung – an international school teacher – said, *“Now my relatives, whenever they see me, they would call me ‘teacher’”*. Similarly, Linh – a public school teacher – remarked, *“Even outside the school, my students address me as ‘teacher’, they don’t use other pronouns. I have the title ‘teacher’ in front of my name, the same as when you finish your PhD, you’ll have the title ‘doctor’.”*

These traditional values, particularly the respect associated with being a teacher, play a significant role in shaping teachers’ bản sắc, especially within the social domain. For example, teachers have set expectations for students to be lễ phép⁶ (well-behaved), nghe lời (be obedient), and wish to be respected by their students. Hà said, *“They are lễ phép and remember to use honorifics, most of the time. In some cases, when they somehow cross the line, their friends would correct them”*. Similarly, Hương described the need to manage boundaries in teacher-student interactions:

Sometimes my students interact with me like I’m their friend. So I have to pay attention to that so they won’t cross the line. Sometimes they want to address me as “chị”⁷ (older sister) because they said I’m similar to their sister at home. And sometimes they forget to use honorifics.

The traditional respect for teachers, rooted in Vietnamese collectivism, also demonstrates the intertwine between the temporal and spatial domains. Teachers believed that although societal changes may influence the degree of respect they receive, teachers will always hold a respected position in Vietnamese society. This reflects the fluidity in Vietnamese collectivism, and by extension the fluidity of bản sắc. As Phan (2010) argues, collectivism is an always evolving aspect of Vietnamese culture that adapts to changing contexts while retaining its core values. The societal changes and their implications on teachers’ bản sắc is further discussed in [Chapter 8](#).

Thus, traditional Vietnamese values do only exist within teachers’ bản sắc but also actively construct it beyond a professional role into a significant societal duty.

Social hierarchy

The respect and language that teachers expect from students reflect an underlying social hierarchy that positions teachers as authority figures, this thesis refers to this social hierarchy as the

⁶ Lễ phép is an appropriate attitude toward older people, using appropriate language, showing gratitude, politeness, manners, and respect.

⁷ Chị is a hierarchical language to address slightly older female, similarly to older sister. It is against the norms for students to address female teachers as “chị”.

hierarchy of role. In societies influenced by Confucianism, the hierarchy of role is prominent, such as ruler-subject, father-child, teacher-student (see [Chapter 3, subsection 3.2.1](#)). This hierarchy is evident in Hà's expectation for students to *nghe lời* (be obedient) and to address her using formal titles rather than “*chị*” (older sister). This aligns with Hofstede's (2011) concept of large power distance in collectivist societies, where hierarchical relationships are accepted as natural, and authority figures are granted a high degree of respect. In this context, language becomes a powerful tool through which societal roles are reinforced and *bản sắc* is performed.

Furthermore, the age of teachers determines how they are perceived. This thesis refers to this notion as the hierarchy of age. Phuong – a public school teacher – stated:

Teachers of different generations have different ways of expressing themselves. For example, teachers from the Gen Z generation are more outgoing. Therefore, the students would see different colours compared to older teachers. Whereas, teachers from the older generations, those who were born in the 70s or 80s or those who are near retirement, are perceived as more serious.

This example reflects broader cultural patterns in Vietnam, where age-based hierarchy remains deeply embedded in interpersonal relations. As Hofstede (2011) and Ashwill and Thai (2005) argue, Vietnamese society places a strong emphasis on respect for elders, a principle that simultaneously commands reverence and creates power distance. Age, in this context, is not merely a demographic category but a social marker of authority, power, and identity.

Trang, an older public school teacher, confirmed this notion, “*It is hard for me to have a close relationship with my students because I am the same age as their parents*”. In collective societies, social hierarchy is also reflected in parent-child relationships, where obedience is strongly instilled (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). In the example of Trang, students associate older teachers with their parents, making them perceived as “*more serious*”. In this dynamic, age widens the distance between teachers and students, reinforcing a more hierarchical interaction. Meanwhile, a younger teacher said, “*I see my students as my friends because they are only 7 or 8 years younger than me, and I think they see me as their friend too*” (Binh). His statement reflects a narrower generational gap, allowing younger teachers to be perceived differently than their older colleagues. Thus, the hierarchies of age and role play crucial roles in shaping how teachers express or negotiate their *bản sắc* in the social domain.

The typical bản – societal expectations

Due to the traditional values and social hierarchies, teachers experience tremendous societal expectations regarding their behaviour and appearance inside and outside of schools:

They expect teachers to have manners, to dress formally, to speak appropriately, not to use curse words (Linh).

Most parents do prefer their children's teachers to be a normal person. And then there shouldn't be any dye on their hair or even tattoos, that is quite sensitive to them (Vinh).

We are expected not to dye their hair, not to have piercings or tattoos (Hà).

In the interviews, teachers compared these societal expectations to “khuôn khổ” (a mould) while focus group participants conceptualised them as the “typical bản”. Here, the “mould” is the closest translation of “khuôn khổ”. However, unlike the English term “mould” which typically refers to a frame or template, emphasising similarity, uniformity, and standardisation, “khuôn khổ” also carries the meaning of boundaries, limitations, or restriction (as explained in [Vietnamese dictionary](#)). Vũ explained, “*I call it a typical bản because it is the core value society expects every teacher to have. It is a role model society wishes teachers to be. It is similar to society's expectations for teachers*”. The typical bản then established a stereotype for teachers. Trang said, “*It is a stereotype like teachers have to be like this, teachers have to act like that. So society's expectation, at the same time, is a stereotype*”. This perception resonates with Mead's concept of the generalised other, which refers to the internalised understanding of societal norms, values, and attitudes. By taking the role of the generalised other, individuals can reflect on how their actions fit within broader social contexts and anticipate how their actions will be perceived by society (Mead, 1934). Participants confirmed this notion, “*My neighbours know I am a teacher. If I act out of the norm, they would say 'She is a teacher, but she acts like this!'*”. Thus, teachers felt they were compelled to behave in a way that aligns with societal expectations:

Even outside of school hours, I feel like I need to act according to these expectations; I can't have students or their parents see I'm drinking or smoking (Hà).

Even when I go out for food, I'm afraid students' parents would see me laugh and curse so out loud in public (Nhu - public school teacher).

These examples suggest that the typical bản operates not merely as a descriptive term but as a conceptual construct – an abstract, complex, yet powerful representation of the normative ideals society projects onto teachers. The typical bản embodies the societal expectations that compel teachers to internalise and perform specific behaviours deemed appropriate for them. It contributes to the shaping of BSTT since ‘being a teacher’ is a social group that extends into a societal role. Meanwhile, BSTT often regulates one's behaviours in alignment to the social group they engage with at given time (see [Section 7.2](#)). Once internalised, the typical bản functions as both a compass and a regulatory force, shaping how teachers navigate and position themselves within the work environment and in wider society. The typical bản then establishes a tacit lived reality – what participants refer to as “khuôn khổ” (a mould) – within which teachers are expected to exist. This mould delineates boundaries of social behaviours (i.e., how to dress, talk, act), subtly yet persistently limiting teachers' ability to act on their BSCN. For example, the desire to be treated with respect, as discussed in the previous sections, does not merely reflect traditional values. Instead, it also stemmed from societal expectations to act accordingly to those traditional values. Thus, when students use a more casual tone

or attempt to relate to teachers as peers, teachers may feel the need to correct the behaviour to maintain those values. Ultimately, once internalised, the typical *bản* determines how teachers perceive their *bản sắc*. Hà said:

When thinking of teachers' bản sắc, what initially comes into my mind is the role model. Teachers have to be role models for others to look up to. Teachers have to be nurturing. It is like society's expectations for teachers.

She further added, “I’m wondering if this is teachers’ *bản sắc* or it is just expectations society has for us.”. Participants’ comments further reinforce how teachers internalise these expectations and come to see themselves through the typical *bản*. Vũ said, “Teachers must be role models, a standard for others to follow.” According to Hà, “No matter what personality a teacher has or how unique it is, they still have to meet certain requirements society has for teachers”.

Here, the typical *bản* is also consistent with Foucault’s concept of subjectification (1995). According to Foucault, individuals are made into subjects through discourses, institutions, and systems of power that define what is acceptable and expected. In the case of Vietnamese teachers, the typical *bản* functions as a discursive tool of subjectification, shaping how teachers come to understand and perform their roles. In other words, through the ongoing process of complying with societal expectations, the typical *bản* is internalised and continuously (re)produced, and teachers may be “moulded” into ideal subjects in Vietnamese society.

Nonetheless, not all teachers conformed unquestioningly to the typical *bản*. Some expressed discomfort, frustration, or even a sense of resistance:

I don’t see the point of having to dress formally (Bình – a public school teacher).

I am a very chill person outside of school, so sometimes I feel restricted (Yến – an international school teacher).

These expressions of resistance indicate a tension between *bản sắc cá nhân* (BSCN) and the typical *bản*. This sense of resistance aligns with Foucault’s concept of self-configuration (1978). While subjectification refers to how individuals are made into subjects through social norms, self-configuration acknowledges the individuals’ ability to negotiate, resist, or reinterpret those norms. It is through this process that teachers may reflect on and redefine their *bản sắc*, asserting their BSCN within, or even against the typical *bản*.

In practices, despite the sense of resistance, teachers still often adhere to societal expectations. Observations in both public and international schools demonstrated that teachers consistently dressed formally, avoided visible tattoos or unconventional hairstyles, abstained from smoking or drinking on campus, and adhered to hierarchical pronouns (e.g., *thầy-con*, *cô-con*). These behavioural patterns underscore that the typical *bản* once internalised could regulate teacher’s behaviours in social contexts. In this sense, teachers’ *bản sắc* is not merely shaped by Vietnamese society; it is governed by it.

In some cases, resistance emerged in practices. For example, while society expects teachers to be mere transmitters of knowledge and enforcers of discipline:

They think teachers must only focus on teaching a lot of content and knowledge (Linh).

Society doesn't care about how we treat the child as long as the child studies well. They don't care about the sentimental values we bring to our students (Hà).

Thus, teachers often prioritise the student-centred approach in their practice:

For me, the most important thing is not the knowledge. Instead, it is my relationship with the students that has to be the priority. So I always try my best to establish teacher-student conversations (Hồng - an international school teacher).

Some students' parents are going their separate ways, and they tell me about it. So I listen and give them advice, to some degree. The important point is that the students need someone to be there to share their burden with. Only by listening, we can somewhat take the burden away from the students (Hương – a public school teacher).

These acts of care and empathy mark a departure from the rigid mould. Observational data further support this, especially among younger teachers who actively interacted with students outside of the formal classroom context. The nature of school (public schools vs international schools) also fosters the space for resistance; international schools offer teachers relatively more room for personal autonomy than public schools, though both groups of teachers remain tethered to Vietnamese social fabrics. This will be further examined in subsequent chapters.

Ultimately, the spatial domain reveals a complex interplay of socialism, Vietnamese traditional values for teachers, social hierarchies, and societal expectations. This domain also establishes the typical *bản*, which operates as a mould that regulates not only outward behaviours but also internalised norms. The typical *bản* suggests that, on the one hand, being a member of the Vietnamese socialist collectivist society often constrain teachers' enactment of BSCN. On the other hand, BSCN, which is different for each teacher, simultaneously pushes back against collective norms in practices. This section underscores that *bản sắc* is not a fixed essence but socially constructed, emerging through negotiation between conformity and resistance, shaped uniquely by the cultures, traditions, value and belief systems of Vietnamese society.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a conceptualisation of teachers' *bản sắc*, acting as a basis for findings discussions in the following chapters. Both groups of teachers understood *bản sắc* as a complex, nuanced, and multi-layered concept, including the collective and individual identities. The dynamic layers of *bản sắc* are grounded and experienced across the temporal, social, and spatial domains. This chapter also proposes a set of terms to understand *bản sắc*, which are used consistently in the subsequent chapters:

- Vietnamese national identity is conceptualised as the outermost layer of bản sắc. Its key components are collectivism and socialist principles reinforced through the public education, playing a crucial role in shaping uniform understanding of bản sắc. The national identity further suggests that such uniformity is forged in alignment with the broader political system.
- Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) signifies the collective identity when teacher belongs to various social groups, one of which is ‘being a teacher’. BSTT distinguishes a Vietnamese national from another. Moreover, being international school teachers or public school teachers adds an additional social group to BSTT. According to participants, this social group diverges bản sắc of these two groups from each other. Situated in collectivist society where group-oriented values are prioritised, BSTT often regulates behaviours in alignment with collective norms.
- Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN) signifies the individual identity as both agency and embeddedness. BSCN is informed by meaning-making processes in BSTT. As each teacher belongs to various social groups and no social group is identical to others, the meaning-making processes are distinctive among individuals. BSCN is therefore unique for each teacher and distinguishes them from one another, enabling them to interpret and even resist collective norms.
- Bản signifies a set of internalised and instilled values in each teacher. Over time, the values shaped and negotiated throughout different layers filter down to form bản. As national identity, BSCN, and BSTT possess fluidity, internalised values in bản could gradually shift overtime. Bản functions as an internal compass guiding teachers’ behaviours in complex social contexts or when tensions arise.
- The typical bản is constructed by societal expectations for teachers, which teachers may internalise and reinforced. The typical bản further constructs the mould within which teachers exist in their daily lives. Although teachers demonstrated an ability to resist the typical bản, in most practices, their behaviours often adhered to societal expectations. This notion reinforces the societal role of teachers in Vietnamese society.

In the subsequent chapters, bản sắc of public school and international school teachers are discussed separately due to several reasons. Firstly, as outlined earlier (see [Section 7.3.2](#)), the nature of the work environment adds a social group to BSTT of international school teachers. While the BSTT of a public school teacher may include social groups such as ‘being a teacher’, ‘being a family member’, ‘a friend’, international school teachers have an additional social group: ‘being an international school teacher’. This distinction justifies a separate discussion, allowing for a deeper exploration of how this added group membership shapes their bản sắc. Secondly, the policy landscape reflects a clear division between the public and international schools, leading to significantly different working conditions for teachers in each. A separate analysis provides space to unpack how these systemic differences shape bản sắc within each group.

Chapter 8: Bản sắc of Public School Teachers

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provides the conceptual framework of bản sắc as collaboratively constructed by research participants. The outermost layer of teachers' bản sắc is national identity – being Vietnamese – which shapes uniform understanding of bản sắc within the nation. Nested within the national identity is bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) signifying the collective identity since each teacher belongs to various social groups; and all teachers are members of the same social group – being a teacher. The inner layer is bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), which is shaped by individuals' unique meaning-making processes across social group memberships in BSTT. At the core lies bản, which contains values filtering down from other layers through negotiations and internalisation. Notably, societal expectations for teachers are conceptualised as the typical bản, creating a mould that influences how teachers conduct and perceive themselves in daily life (see Figure 7.1).

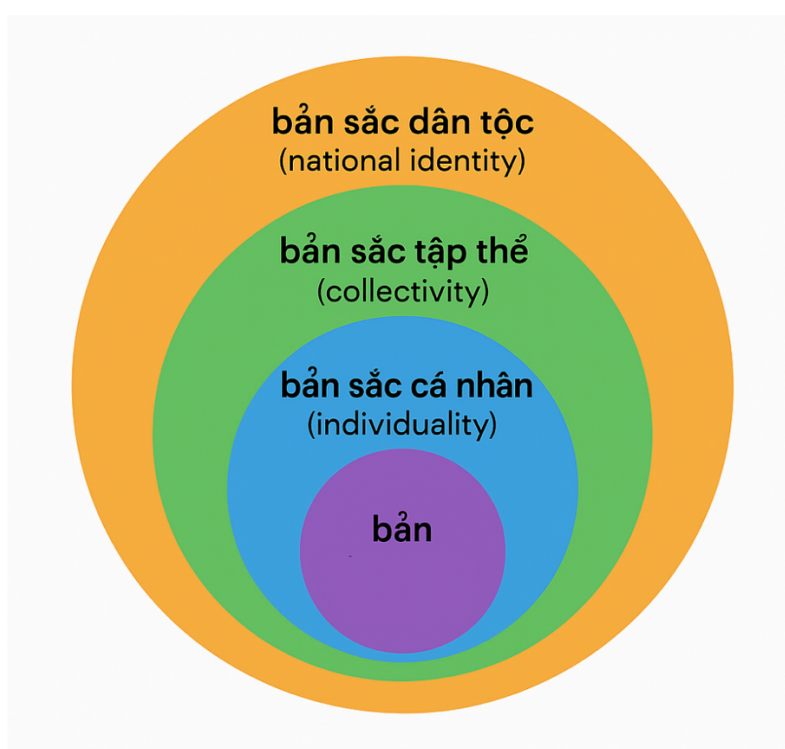


Figure 7.1: Research participants' conceptualisation of bản sắc (from Chapter 7)

Furthermore, the multi-layered construct of teachers' bản sắc is grounded in and across three interrelated domains: temporal, social, and spatial. The temporal domain highlights the fluid and evolving nature of bản sắc over time. However, this evolution does not occur in isolation. Rather, temporal changes are embedded within and shaped by the social and spatial contexts in which teachers live and work. In other words, teachers do not experience bản sắc at a single point in time, but through an ongoing process shaped by the dynamic of their past, present, and imagined future. As

outlined in [Chapter 6](#), changes in bản sắc require a social context to happen. Given this conceptualisation of bản sắc, this chapter discusses bản sắc of public school teachers in the work environment (the social domain) and the Vietnamese society (the spatial domain). The temporal domain, reflecting the fluid and evolving nature of bản sắc, is incorporated throughout the discussion where relevant. The themes in this chapter are informed by thematic analysis and theme redefining as outline in [Chapter 6](#).

This chapter is structured into two main sections. [Section 8.2](#) discusses bản sắc of public school teachers in the work environment including the development of national identity through socialist principles, social hierarchy, social harmony in group-based values, and cultural traditions in terms of traditional morality and customs. [Section 8.3](#) discusses bản sắc of public school teachers in Vietnamese society, including societal standing, societal roles, teachers' income, and changes in teachers' bản sắc in relation to societal changes.

The chapter concludes by synthesising key findings, arguing for the profound connection between public school teachers' bản sắc and Vietnamese society, as well as the evolvement of bản sắc in response to shifts in the education landscape.

8.2 Teachers' bản sắc in their work environment

This section explores how bản sắc of public school teachers is shaped in their work environment (the social domain) through the dynamics in teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-school leaders relationships. The work environment also includes the school organisation, layout, and school climate. At public schools, Vietnamese socialism and collectivist values are deeply embedded in the education. They don't exist as separate entities but rather are intertwined with each other, shaping teachers' bản sắc.

Throughout this section, illustrative images are included. As discussed in [Chapter 6](#), these images were sourced from Google Image searches, informed by the researcher's hand sketches during the field trip (see [Appendix K](#)).

8.2.1 The development of national identity

Bản sắc dân tộc (national identity), the outermost layer of bản sắc (see [Figure 7.1](#)), plays a pivotal role in shaping bản sắc of teachers. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the national identity is deeply embedded in socialism which was clearly reflected in the observed public school.

Every Monday morning, teachers and students participated in a formal 45-minute flag salutation rite, beginning at 7 a.m. The rite featured drum playing, the national anthem, the anthem of the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation, and the school's traditional song. Significantly, after the song of the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers Organisation, students chanted the Organisation's

slogan: “*Vì Tổ quốc xã hội chủ nghĩa! Vì lý tưởng Bác Hồ vĩ đại: Sẵn sàng!*” (For the socialist Fatherland! For the great Uncle Ho’s ideals: Ready!).

According to Underwood (2020), such practices encourage students to reflect on their conduct in relation to the ideals of Ho Chi Minh, the founder of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Singing the national anthem aloud serves not only to inspire patriotism but also to develop a collective appreciation for Vietnamese national identity (see Image 8.1). These practices highlight the role of education in nurturing patriotism, nationalist pride, and a commitment to serving the nation (Ibid.).

The presence of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in the organisation of the public school was strongly evident. The activities of the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers organisation within the school were overseen by a designated general (see [Chapter 2, subsection 2.5.1](#)) and supported by a Red Star team made up of elected students. Together, they play a key role in maintaining discipline and order – an arrangement that reflects the Party’s ideologies (MOET, 2018b), which governs public primary schools. Notably, this designated general was a teacher who also carried out teaching duties in the school. Furthermore, symbolic representations such as the national flag, a prominent portrait of Ho Chi Minh, and a quotation from his *Five Things Uncle Ho Taught Children* were ubiquitous, serving as constant reminders of national identity for both teachers and students.



Image 8.1: Illustration of a flag salutation rite (Source: Google image)

Studies from collectivist and socialist countries have pointed out that education in the public system aims to develop national identity through patriotic activities, transmitting nation’s ideals,

history, social and political values (Wang et al., 2024; Ritter, 2013; Lin, 2025; Khader, 2012). For example, Lin (2025), in a study on national identity education in Hongkong, found that the promotion of national identity in public schools is tied to the Chinese Communist Party's visions such as the Chinese dream, a strong China, and national security. Similarly, in Singapore, national identity is embedded in the teaching of social studies, civics and moral education, history, and geography (Ritter, 2013). Anderson (1983) argues that national identity is socially constructed through shared narratives, traditions, and symbols, which are often conveyed through school curricula, including history, literature, and civic education. From a postcolonial perspective, nations formerly under colonial rule place a significant emphasis on celebrating and cultivating their national identities (Said, 1995; Fanon, 1965). Chan (2008) observes that postcolonial schooling often becomes a space for resisting colonial legacies and fostering localised identities. Within this context, public schools in Vietnam function as a platform for developing national identity in *bản sắc* of students and teachers.

Discourse on Vietnam and its culture indicates that the country possesses a robust national culture that venerates the concept of resistance, stemming from its historical experiences of warfare and colonisation (Salomon and Ket, 2007; Lien, 2024; Phan, 2010). A pivotal aspect of Vietnamese politics and society is the prominence of nationalism and national identity (Salomon and Ket, 2007). National identity is particularly significant in Vietnam owing to its political system – a one-party state that asserts a monopoly on the reality of the national narrative (Ibid.). In such a system, education serves as the primary route for reinforcing a coherent Vietnamese national identity (Salomon and Ket, 2007; Underwood, 2020).

Public school teachers in this study had all undergone public education, meaning their national identity had been continuously shaped throughout their lives. Significantly, teachers were critically aware of the link between Vietnamese national identity and socialism, which shapes their *bản sắc*. For example, in the follow-up conversation with Phương, she said:

Of course the socialist values we learned at school shaped our bản sắc. For example, we learned about Five Things Uncle Ho Taught Children, which was about values like 'Love your nation, love your đồng bào'⁸ (compatriots); Study well, work well; Unite well, keep discipline well; Comply with hygienic regulations; Be humble, be truthful, be brave'. Or when we frequently participate in the flag salutation rite, the national identity is absorbed into us. So, for sure, we were indoctrinated with socialist principles.

She further pointed out that the socialist values were later translated into the teaching practices:

⁸ A cultural expression carrying collectivist values. It refers to people of the same race, nation, or country, implying a close relationship like blood relatives. “Đồng bào” in direct translation is “same womb”.

In public schools, it is required that teachers must embrace socialism and teach them to the students. It might not be the case at international schools, but at public schools, socialism is crucial in our bản sắc.

Teachers also highlighted the close connection between public school teachers' bản sắc and the wider society, attributed to policies ensuring that most public school teachers are tied to the state system. As Phan remarked, *"There is an intertwining between the society and our working environment because it is ensured by the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)."* Given this connection with the wider society, bản sắc of public school teachers in their work environment reflects a set of Vietnamese collectivist values such as social hierarchy, social harmony, morality, and customs. These notions are discussed in the next subsections.

8.2.2 Social Hierarchy

The presence of social hierarchy in public schools reflects role-based and age-based hierarchies in Vietnamese society. In collectivist societies, individuals are expected to demonstrate respect and even obedience toward those who are older or hold higher social positions (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Tran, 1999). This subsection examines social hierarchy regarding the hierarchy of roles (i.e., teacher-student and teacher-school leader relationships) and the hierarchy of age (i.e., younger-older teacher relationships).

Teacher-student dynamics

The findings suggest that bản sắc of public school teachers reflects and is shaped by Vietnamese social hierarchy, particularly in teacher-student relationships. In the observed school, the physical arrangement of the schoolyard reflects this hierarchy. A raised platform was reserved for teachers during whole-school activities, such as the flag salutation rites and morning exercises. During these activities, students were seated in the schoolyard facing the platform where teachers were positioned (see Image 8.2). This physical arrangement reflects teachers' higher position in the hierarchy of role.



Image 8.2: Schoolyard set-up (Source: Google image)

Similarly, the classroom layout mirrored this hierarchy, with the teacher's desk placed on a raised platform, from where students looked upon to teachers (see Image 8.3). This arrangement is emblematic of the broader social hierarchy within Vietnamese society, where those holding a higher position are expected to be well-respected (Hofstede, 2011). This dynamic is less prominent at international schools where the school and classroom layouts do not reflect similar hierarchy (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)).



Image 8.3: Classroom set-up (Source: Google image)

The typical *bản* appears to be constructed around the social hierarchy in teacher-student dynamics:

We are expected to keep a distance from students (Bình).

People think teachers must only focus on teaching a lot of content and knowledge while neglecting relationship development with students (Linh).

At the observed site, teachers' actions appeared to be consistent with the typical *bản*. Firstly, teachers often monitored voices of students during study periods by constantly reminding students to raise their hands to answer a question. This means students without their hands raised do not have opportunities to vocalise in the classroom. Moreover, teachers regularly reminded students to remain quiet and constantly required students to use honorifics when answering a question.

Secondly, teachers monitored students' actions within the classroom. For instance, teachers would encourage students to clap their hands or praise their friends when a question was answered correctly. However, this encouragement was often delivered in an authoritative voice. In addition, most teachers required the whole class to stand up for greetings at the beginning and at the end of each lesson when the teacher entered and exited the classrooms. Students were also required to stand up when answering a question (see Image 8.3).

Thirdly, each classroom was equipped with a big and heavy wooden ruler, symbolising authority. Some teachers often held the ruler to point at the board or to walk around the class. Most of the time, the ruler was often tapped heavily on the teacher's desk as a form of catching students'

attention or to remind students to stay quiet. Generally, the atmosphere in the classrooms was serious, and teachers appeared to be well-respected and even feared. Outside of the classroom, most students appeared to shy away from teachers despite greeting teachers with respect every encounter.

The observations indicate a large power distance (Hofstede, 2011) in teacher-student relationships as teachers hold a higher hierarchical position. This reflects Wu Lun's ideologies rooted in Confucianism in which teachers' superior knowledge is emphasised. The belief that "*Không thầy đố mày làm nên*" (one cannot accomplish great things without teachers) is ingrained in the culture, reinforcing the idea that teachers are the primary sources of knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, in this context, a democratic atmosphere where students are free to speak and act is considered disruptive to societal norms (Underwood, 2020). The typical *bản* is thus shaped by the expectations of teachers' role as authority figures, maintaining distance from students while asserting their authority in the classroom. The above observations demonstrate how teachers adhere to this typical *bản*.

However, this observation stands in contrast with interview data. When discussing relationships with students, teachers described a sense of closeness while maintaining social hierarchy:

I think my students adore me and are not shy away from me. They still keep in touch with me even after graduating (Huong).

I have to pay attention to that so they won't cross the line. Sometimes they want to address me as "chị" (older sister) because they said I'm similar to their sister at home. And sometimes they forget to use honorifics (Huong).

I think my students see me as their friend. But they still respect me and address me as "thầy" (male teacher) (Binh).

Teachers also reflected on their own experiences as students in the public school system, indicating a desire to foster less hierarchical relationships with their students than those they had experienced themselves. As Huong explained:

When I was a student, I feared my teacher, so I was under a lot of pressure of having to behave carefully in their presence. So now, I don't want to give my students the same pressure.

These narratives suggest a form of resistance to the typical *bản*, where teachers actively challenge the mould that governs expected behaviours in teacher-student relationships. Instead of being an authoritative figure and keeping distance, these teachers prioritise closeness and student comfort while maintaining the social hierarchy through respect and language.

Furthermore, these cases illustrate changes in their *bản sắc* in relation to changes in education landscape, signifying fluidity in *bản sắc*. Historically, Vietnam's public education system used a teacher-centred approach, defining teacher-student interactions via a formal, disciplined, and authoritative framework (Bui and Nguyen, 2025). The revised Law on Education promotes the student-centred education approach, indicating that teachers would no longer be regarded as

authoritative figures (Vietnamese Government, 2020a). Tuan (2021) indicates that this reform presents issues for teachers in their interactions with students, since those who maintain strict classroom discipline may receive negative responses from students.

In addition, the observed site took place at a primary school while most interview participants are secondary school teachers. This distinction indicates that social hierarchy and behavioural discipline may be more emphasised at the primary level. As Bui and Nguyen (2025) point out, public primary schools often prioritise structure and compliance despite the reformed policies. When checking the observation data with the school principal, although the principal did not specifically state the education approach at the school, she agreed that disciplinary practices were emphasised.

Moreover, teachers who indicated a closeness in their relationship with students were younger teachers, while Trang, an older teacher, said, *“During my 7 and 8 years being a homeroom teacher, my students tend to shy away from me”*. Trang’s quote is consistent with the hierarchy of age discussed in [Chapter 7](#), where older teachers are more often seen as authoritative figures, making it difficult to cultivate teacher-student relationships.

Younger-Older Teachers dynamics

The hierarchy of age, one of the key aspects of the social hierarchy, creates a division among younger and older teachers and impacts their daily interaction. These dynamics reflect collectivist values, which influence how individuals interact with one another (see [Chapter 3, subsection 3.2.1](#)).

Although there wasn’t a clear definition for “*giáo viên trẻ*” (younger teachers) and “*giáo viên lớn tuổi*” (older teachers), participants implied that younger and older teachers were based on the generations they were born into. Those who were born after the year 1990 (Millennials and Gen Z) are considered younger teachers, while older teachers are those who were born before 1990. Younger teachers often feel uncomfortable engaging in casual, friendly conversations with older colleagues due to a lack of common ground. For instance, younger teachers, during the interviews, said:

I am not close to my colleagues because they are older than I, so there is nothing in common to talk about (Bình).

Some teachers are older, so we keep a distance (Linh).

When interacting with older colleagues, we kind of have a distance. We are colleagues, but because they are older, I have to behave according to certain standards. So with older colleagues, I tend to tone down my behaviour and attitude, and be careful with my language (Phan).

Trang, an older teacher, also addressed a gap in the relationship between her and younger teachers, *“I am close to colleagues I have been working with for a long time, but with younger colleagues, our interaction is mild”*. These examples reflect the hierarchy of age in Vietnamese society, where respect for elders is a fundamental value. In such a society, younger individuals are

expected to show deference and respect to their older counterparts (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Binh's statement, *"I must show a lot of respect and reservations around older teachers, I can't act comfortably around them"*, further confirms this notion.

The age hierarchy between younger and older teachers also parallels the dynamics between teachers and students. As mentioned in the previous section, older teachers often appear distant and unapproachable to students, in contrast to the more approachable younger teachers. The age hierarchy between teachers indicates that younger teachers are on a lower social hierarchy than the older ones, making the distance between students and young teachers closer than between students and older teachers.

Teacher-School Leader Dynamics

The dynamics between teachers and school leaders reflect the hierarchy of roles. School leaders are considered to be at the top of the hierarchy, and teachers are expected to show respect for them through behaviour:

With the school leaders, I have to bow my head to show regard because they are in a much higher position than I (Linh).

and languages:

Because their position is higher than mine, I have to respect them by behaving politely and using honorifics in the conversations (Phan).

Phan further added, *"I'm not very close with the subject leader, obviously because she is the subject leader, and also because she is older than me"*. Here, "she" is translated from "cô", a hierarchical pronoun used to address an older female person. In this context, "cô" also means "teacher", a higher position in the social hierarchy of roles.

These instances illustrate how the *bản sắc* of teachers mirrors the broader social organisation of Vietnam, where hierarchy based on age and role is integral. As Hofstede (2011) asserts, individuals lower on the hierarchical position are expected to show respect, good manners, and even fear toward those in higher positions. The act of bowing one's head as a form of respect, as described by Linh, is a concrete manifestation of this social hierarchy. It is deeply rooted in Confucian values that emphasise respect for elders, obedience, and submission (Yang and Tamney, 2011).

What was unspoken during the interviews also indicated this social hierarchy. Although Binh denied his fear of school leaders, a norm is clearly implied: *"I respect them, but I'm not too afraid of them, I am not the type of person who fears the school leaders"*. This comment suggests that, while teachers may not explicitly express fear, they still operate within a system that requires respect and adherence to hierarchical norms. The unspoken nature of this hierarchy further underscores the pervasive social values on *bản sắc* of public school teachers.

The following section discusses another social value – social harmony – manifested in public schooling and its implications on teachers’ bản sắc.

8.2.3 Social harmony

One of the Vietnamese collectivist values is social harmony, prioritising group-based values over individualistic goals (see [Chapter 3, subsection 3.4.1](#)). These values transpire in the work environment of public school teachers, thus shaping their bản sắc around group-based values. In the observed school, group activities were highlighted. For example, every morning from Tuesday to Friday, there was a morning exercise for all students from 7 a.m. to 7.30 a.m. when students gathered in the schoolyard by their homeroom class. During this session, students exercise together under the guidance of teachers. Additionally, a flag salutation ceremony took place every Monday morning, involving the entire school.

The physical layout of the school and classrooms further underscored group-based values, with all classrooms facing each other around a central schoolyard (see Image 8.4). This arrangement stands in stark contrast with the international school’s layout, where classrooms face outward (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). Moreover, during teaching periods, the doors of every classroom remained open.



Image 8.4: School layout (Source: Google image)

In terms of classroom design, student desks were built for two students rather than for individual use, in contrast to international schools (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). These desks were arranged in fixed rows, placed closely together with minimal walking space (see Image 8.5). This

seating arrangement, commonly employed in the public school system, is believed to promote classroom harmony and instil a sense of community among students (Underwood, 2020). It reflects the group-based values of the Vietnamese collectivist society. As Nhur stated, *“I think the classroom is a miniature version of the wider society.”*



Image 8.5: Students' seating arrangement (Source: Google image)

Classroom management in the observation site also reflected group-based values. Each class was officially divided into teams based on seating rows, and these teams remained consistent throughout the year. While students might form different groups for specific activities, the row-based teams served as a constant structure.

Additionally, the school featured a single staffroom, creating a shared space for all teachers to interact. The staffroom included one large oval table, enabling teachers to face one another and facilitating communication (see Image 8.6). These arrangements and activities reflect the importance of knowing one's peers, fostering connections, and building a close-knit and harmonious community – hallmarks of a collective society (Hofstede, 2011; Quynh, 2021). Underwood (2020) supports this perspective, asserting that Vietnamese individuals typically do not exist autonomously but thrive through social coherence within their communities.



Image 8.6: Staff room (Source: Google image)

Teachers acknowledged that even when the typical *bản* may differ from their *bản sắc cá nhân* (BSCN), they often conformed to maintain group harmony. For example, Linh admitted, “*When at home or with my friends, I curse quite often, but when going to work, I behave according to chuẩn mực (standards/ expectations)*”. Here, Linh prioritised BSTT over personal habits to fit in the role of a teacher. The act of sacrificing personal goals for group harmony aligns with national values stated in the 2014 Resolution, “*Making noble sacrifices for the sake of national independence and the happiness of the people*” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2014).

Similarly, Binh remarked, “*It is a mould, but I have to act accordingly because it is the way of the whole system. I can’t change it, so I have to accept it*”. Moreover, the typical *bản* is constructed by societal expectations for teachers to be role models, which shape teachers’ BSTT when they have to act accordingly. As Binh explained, “*We have to practice what we teach. We teach our students to be good people, so we must have certain morality. We shouldn’t do something that is against social moral standards.*” These examples demonstrate the suppression of personal beliefs by group values common in collective societies (Hsu, 1981).

The adherence to group-based values can be traced to the public education system’s emphasis on moral education. Rooted in Confucianism (Dam, 1999), Vietnamese culture values morality and discipline. How *bản sắc* of public school teachers is shaped by such cultural traditions is discussed in the next section.

8.2.4 Cultural traditions

Traditional morality

In contrast to conservative morality, which seeks personal glory, the concept of morality in Vietnam serves the collective interests of the Communist Party, the populace, and humanity (Lan, 2022). The fundamental tenets of that morality are loyalty to the nation, fidelity to the populace, compassion for others, diligence, frugality, honesty, righteousness, and selflessness (Ibid.). According to Truong (2013), moral education in Vietnam is influenced by Confucianism, which is reflected in both social life and legal documents.

The Education Law of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam posits that moral education in primary schools aims to teach students to respect, love and show good behaviour towards grandparents, parents, teachers, older people; to love brothers, sisters, and friends; to be sincere, confident, eager to learn, and appreciative of nature's beauty.

(Truong, 2013, p.18)

In public education, learning morality is prioritised over academic achievement (Underwood, 2020). This notion is obvious in a famous saying, “*tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*” (learn etiquette first, learn literature later). This saying was displayed in the middle of the schoolyard in the observed school as a motto for education (see Image 8.7). Underwood (2020) notes that Vietnamese moral education ensures that children are nurtured to become competent citizens capable of conforming to social norms. This approach helps individuals integrate into society and contributes to societal stability and order (Ibid.). By exposing every child to moral education, the schools foster their development into ethical citizens, enabling them to thrive equitably with their peers. This moral education, ultimately, cultivates and fortifies societal cohesion in each individual over time (Ibid.).

In moral education, teachers play a significant role: “*Having a teacher in one's life means having morality, respecting teachers and respecting morality are two sides of one important value*” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2019 as cited in Dung and Pereira, 2022, p.44). Thus, moral education at public schools has lasting impacts, developing morality – a Vietnamese cultural tradition – in public school teachers from their own schooling experiences and continuing to shape their bản sắc as a teacher. During interviews, public school teachers also emphasised their beliefs on morality:

I think that the most important thing for teachers to have is morality and a decent lifestyle (Binh).

As public school teachers, we teach our students morality, so we have to have it in ourselves because we are role models for our students (Trang).

The most basic thing every teacher must possess is morality (Phan).



Image 8.7: The presence of the education motto “*tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*” (Source: Google image)

The emphasis on moral education is intricately linked to national identity, social harmony, and social hierarchy, addressed in earlier sections. In Vietnamese culture, filial piety plays a key role in shaping expected behaviours, encouraging children to recognise their responsibilities within the family and society for the collective benefits (Burr, 2014). The morality developed in teachers during their schooling explains their compliance with the typical *bản*, further shaping their *bản sắc* as they impart similar moral lessons in their work environment. As Bình stated, “*We have to practice what we teach*”.

Fine customs

The typical *bản* reflects a Vietnamese cultural tradition – “*thuần phong mỹ tục*⁹” (Fine customs). It constructs an expectation for appearance, which Bình described as a “mould”. As explained in [Chapter 7](#), the word “mould” in Vietnamese not only means standardisation but also limitations or restrictions. Female teachers must dress modestly, are not allowed to dye their hair in bright colours; tattoos and nose piercings are extremely forbidden, according to Như. Như recounted an instance, “*I remember one time, the principal gathered all female teachers in the schoolyard and asked us to remove our nose piercings*”.

⁹ A Vietnamese proverb that refers to all the good and healthy customs, traditions, moral concepts, and lifestyles of a nation. “*Thuần phong*”: pure customs; “*mỹ tục*”: beautiful, fine, or good customs/ traditions.

This notion signifies a regulation of the female teachers' bodies through which teachers are judged by cultural expectations. Mallozzi (2012) contends that cultural expectations often frame female teachers as conservative and modest, a perception reinforced by their physical appearance. Mallozzi further pointed out that although bodies typically go unnoticed unless they deviate from the norm, at which point they are often reduced to isolated parts (e.g., breasts) or treated as aesthetic objects (e.g., hairstyles) (Ibid.). Clothing and nose piercings from Nhr's example become a marker that defines the boundaries of what is deemed an acceptable female teacher appearance. Mallozzi (2012) also points out that teachers' embodied behaviours are subject to external scrutiny until they internalise these norms, feeling compelled to self-regulate in accordance with institutional expectations to avoid criticism or disciplinary action. Consequently, teachers must continually negotiate whether to conform, resist, or navigate alternative paths (Ibid.). In the case of public school teachers, they adhered despite disagreeing with the expectations, Nhr said, *"It is too strict, but I have to accept it"*. Observation data confirmed the same adherence as female teachers usually dressed in Vietnamese traditional dress (Áo dài) with minimal jewellery or hair dye (see Image 8.6). At the observed site, and as confirmed by Phuong, female teachers are required to wear uniform Áo dài every Monday for the flag salutation rite. On other days, they can wear clothes of their choice as long as it is modest. However, as Phuong noted, most female teachers still choose to wear Áo dài while Binh observed different kinds of dresses. This suggests that female teachers' choices of appearance are limited within cultural expectations, which signifies the typical bản or the mould.

Not only female but also male teachers experience the mould for appearance. They also had to follow the dress code despite it being against their personal preference. Binh, a male teacher, said, *"I have to dress formally, but I don't see the point in that."* When being asked if this expectation was more severe for female teachers, he said, *"I don't think so, some female teachers in my school still wear colourful dresses and dye their hair, as long as they don't dye it too bright. But tattoos are extremely forbidden"*.

Decision 16/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT on the teaching professional's moral standards regulate the appearance standards for both male and female teachers, *"Clothing and jewellery when performing tasks must be simple, neat, polite, suitable for the teaching profession, not offensive or distracting the learner's attention."* (MOET, 2008, Article 5, Clause 3). This Decision signifies that the cultural influences of fine customs apply to all public school teachers, regardless of gender. Phuong, in a follow-up conversation, echoed the same notion: *"I think the expectation for dress code apply to both male and female teachers"*. She further implies an internalisation of the norms:

The expectations for appearance or behaviour are particularly strict in public schools. And I think it is reasonable. Because in public schools we represent the nation, we must protect our image as teachers. If someone doesn't agree with these values, they could teach somewhere else. But once we work at a public school, we must adhere to it.

Nevertheless, the contrasting views between teachers regarding the dress code reveal an underlying tension surrounding this issue. This further implies that each teacher's *bản sắc* is shaped in distinct ways by the traditional fine customs. Given that BSCN and *bản* are unique to each individual (see Chapter 7, subsection 7.2.2), these layers inform how teachers interpret societal expectations, such as appearance norms, leading them to conform, internalise, or resist the typical *bản*.

For public school teachers, the national identity, social hierarchy, social harmony, and cultural traditions remain central to their *bản sắc* in the work environment, not only in the present but across the course of their lives. Since all participants in this study were once students in public schools, these values have shaped their *bản sắc* from the past, continue to do so in the present, and the future. This ongoing influence highlights the significance of the temporal domain in understanding how *bản sắc* is continuously shaped and reshaped over time.

Overall, this section has argued that *bản sắc* of public school teachers in their environment is shaped by the collectivist values and socialist principles of Vietnamese society. In this sense, teachers' *bản sắc* extends beyond the physical boundaries of the schools, reaching into the broader society.

8.3 Teachers' *bản sắc* in Vietnamese society

As *bản sắc* of public school teachers extends beyond the boundaries of the workplace to the wider society, it is different from the familiar concept of professional identity. While the framework of professional identity posits that identity is shaped through social interactions in the work environment and participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Beijaard et al., 2004) and emphasises the importance of agency, *bản sắc* of public school teachers highlights the significance of *bản sắc tập thể* (BSTT). Although it is true that there is a sense of resistance in every society (Foucault, 1995), it is rare for individuals to act on the sense of resistance as it is considered disruptive to act against the norms in a collective society like Vietnam (Underwood, 2020). The adherence to the typical *bản* discussed in the previous section confirms this notion.

This section discusses public school teachers' *bản sắc* in Vietnamese society in terms of societal standing, societal role, and changes in *bản sắc* in relation to changes in society. This section also contends how incomes and teaching subjects influence *bản sắc* of public school teachers.

8.3.1 Societal standing and societal role

Societal standing

Public school teachers stated that they have a high standing in Vietnamese society and are well-respected, as the society highly values the role of teachers. Teachers often referred to traditional sayings such as “*Tôn sư trọng đạo*” (*respecting the teachers*) to describe the high societal standing

(Trang, Vinh). Trang further said, *“Teachers are respected in society. Especially, I work at a public school, and in the public school environment, teachers are considered important and respected”*.

The title ‘teacher’ further affirms public school teachers’ high societal standing. Teachers pointed out that they were always addressed by title with much regard by students’ parents, administrative staff in the schools, and even their acquaintances in other social groups (Linh, Huong, Binh). This corresponds with Dung and Pereira (2002), who indicate that teachers are held in high esteem by the parents of students, regardless of the pupils’ academic performance or school settings, spanning from kindergarten to higher education.

OECD (2019) also reported that a majority of Vietnamese teachers, namely 92%, either agree or strongly agree that their job is highly esteemed in society. The high societal standing of teachers is clearly stated in the national Law on Education (2019):

Teachers play a decisive role in ensuring the quality of education, they have important position and are honoured by the whole nation.

(Vietnamese Parliament, 2019, Section 1, Article 66, Clause 2)

Societal roles

In a society influenced by Confucianism like Vietnam, each person has certain functions that are linked by mutual obligation; everyone must recognise and fulfil their roles appropriately (Berling, 1982; Miller, 1984; Morris and Peng, 1994). Thus, teachers fulfil their roles not only inside the schools but also continuously throughout their careers, both during and after retirement (Dung and Pereira, 2022). Research participants echoed the same notion:

Regardless of our own personality, we have to meet certain criteria the society requires (Trang).

When you are a public school teacher, your neighbours know that you are a teacher (Phan).

We have a role in society (Phuong).

Due to societal expectations for teachers to fulfil their social role, teachers are often blamed for students’ academic failure:

They should have questioned their child if they don’t meet the learning outcomes, instead of blaming it on teachers (Phan).

We have to be responsible for the students’ outcomes, but the average class size in public schools is 40 students a class, except for schools that meet the national standards. But the number of schools that meet the national standards is insignificant. At the school where my son is attending now, there are 50 students in a class (Trang).

Moreover, due to societal expectations for teachers to fulfil their social role, the typical bản plays a crucial part in shaping bản sắc of public school teachers. Participants felt obligated to fulfil

their social role by acting compliantly with the typical *bản*. Otherwise, they would be perceived as odd:

If we dye our hair or have tattoos, people would say something like 'she is a teacher but she dyes her hair', 'she is a teacher but she has tattoos' (Nhu).

If I do something against the norms, people would judge and say 'she is a teacher but she acts like this' (Trang).

We are expected to act according to our roles as a teachers. Otherwise, we would hear people say something like 'Are you even allowed to have piercings?' (Phan).

Consequently, public school teachers felt the need to guard their behaviour in public, as Nhu remarked, *"It is like we are monitored everywhere we go"*. This example echoed Foucault's concept of *"Discipline and Punish"*, highlighting how institutions exert power over individuals, shaping their behaviours and self-perceptions (Foucault, 1995). He posits that the uncertainty of surveillance leads people to regulate themselves, making external control unnecessary. In the context of Vietnamese collectivist society, this institutional power resonates with prevailing societal expectations, wherein individuals are often expected to conform in order to maintain social harmony. Therefore, teachers, even outside of work, conform to expectations: *"I'm careful with my actions and language when I'm in public"* (Phuong). Even members of teachers' social groups expect them to conform, as Nhu said, *"My mom usually says 'you are a teacher now, so stop using curse words'."*

According to Wenger's (1999) concept of identity formation within a community of practice (CoP), acting in alignment with the social norms enables individuals to internalise societal norms and values. This shapes their self-perception and how they are viewed by others. In this case, the concept of community of practice reflects the social group of teachers (a part of their BSTT) in Vietnamese society. By adhering to the typical *bản*, teachers develop a sense of belonging and strengthen their BSTT. This sense of belonging was evident in the participants' accounts, particularly through learning and support:

I received a lot of support from my former classmates in college, and in the Master's course, they helped me with my difficulties. For example, if some teaching content is too difficult, I would send a text to our group chat and someone will answer my questions. I also helped them with teaching certain content. Some younger teachers asked me about job interview tips for teachers or demo classes, and I provided them with guidance. We basically just help each other out (Linh).

and collaboration, as Phan remarked:

The National Education Reform required a change in all course books. So the schools had to decide which course book to use together. That was why we had to work together to sort out the book delivery, teaching resources and experiences.

As Wenger (1999) argues, through participation and engagement in CoPs, individuals are recognised as valued members. Via this process, learning and negotiation of meaning occur, and

identities are formed (Ibid.). The examples of Linh and Phan suggest that teachers' collaboration and support for one another highlight their recognition as valued members of the community, fostering a sense of belonging which ultimately shapes their bản sắc.

8.3.2 Socio-economic values

Low income

Public school teachers in Vietnam are widely perceived as underpaid, a stereotype grounded in national salary scheme (see [Chapter 2, subsection 2.5.2](#)). In a 2019 survey of high school teacher salaries in Asia-Pacific countries, Vietnam ranked last, with teachers earning an average of \$1,800 annually (Vuong et al., 2024; Value Champion, 2019). Participants echoed this sentiment:

The standard salary for teachers is around 4 million VND a month for new teachers and a maximum of 10 million VND a month for senior permanent teachers with 10 years of experience. We can't even afford our bread and butter, let alone pay rent in big cities like Hanoi. Luckily, I live at home, so I don't have to pay rent and food (Binh).

Trang connected their low salary to how society and the government value teachers' living conditions. She said, *"The government and society never take the living standard of teachers into consideration, and teachers' necessities of life have been seriously ignored."*

This financial strain is reflected in teacher attrition rates. According to OECD (2020), one in ten teachers in Vietnam has considered leaving the profession. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) reported that more than 16,000 public school teachers left their positions between 2021 and 2023, citing increased workloads, societal pressure, and inadequate pay (Vietnamnet Global, 2023). As Binh stated:

I think it is unfair. We not only teach but also have to prepare lesson plans, write reports, and attend meetings. We have to endure pressure from the parents, the school leaders, the students, and the workload while we get paid so little.

The public also acknowledges that teachers have to put in a lot of additional hours in addition to their regular salary just to make ends meet (Vietnamnet Global, 2023). A lot of teachers are splitting their time between teaching during the day and selling items online at night (Ibid.). When being asked how they made ends meet with such low salaries, a public school teacher jokingly said, *"Well, I know most female teachers have a rich husband"* (Phuong). This quote conveys a sense of resignation to the income situation.

Subject hierarchy leading to income disparities

In Vietnam, the society and educational system value certain subjects more than others. For example, Circular 13/2022/TT-BGDĐT stated the compulsory subjects for higher-secondary school

students, including: Vietnamese Literature; Mathematics; English as a Second Language (ESL); History; Physical Education (P.E); National Defence Education, Extra Curricular and Career Guidance; and Local Content Education. Meanwhile, elective subjects are Geography; Economics and Law Education; Physics, Chemistry, Biography, Information Technology (I.T); Technology, Music; and Arts (MOET, 2022). For the National Graduation Exam (taken after the last year of Upper-secondary school), students must take Vietnamese Literature and Mathematics, and choose two of the following subjects: ESL, History, Physics, Chemistry, Biography, Geography, Economics and Law Education, I.T, and Technology (Vietnamese Government, 2024).

As interpreted from this Circular, the most highly valued subjects are Vietnamese Literature and Mathematics. While base salaries for public school teachers are standardised, opportunities for additional income depend on the perceived value of their subject. This means teachers of high-value subjects could do private tutoring outside of school hours. Former studies have referred to this practice as “shadow education” (Lange et al., 2021; Bray and Kykins, 2012).

According to statistics by Ánh Dương (2024) on Upper-secondary school students’ choice of subjects in private tutoring, approximately 78% of surveyed students took Mathematics, 54% of them took ESL (English as Second Language, 47.59% chose Physics, and 52.4% selected Chemistry. For ESL teachers, they have the opportunity to run extra classes due to the increasing demand for English due to policy push (i.e., Circular 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT, Circular 50/2020/TT-BGDĐT) (MOET, 2020a; 2020b).

Consequently, the subject hierarchy has resulted in income disparities among teachers. For example, Linh, an ESL teacher, said:

In Vietnam, we have to teach our extra classes, otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to survive. I run extra classes at home, I have around 100 students enrolled until now, so I could earn around 10 to 20 million VND a month besides my salary from the school.

Meanwhile, Bình, a Geography teacher believed that as his subject is not highly valued, he couldn’t generate extra income from extra classes, he further added, “*When people know my teaching subject, they often ask why I want to be a geography teacher, geography teachers are very poor, or how I could afford food, I think those questions make sense.*”

The low incomes and income disparities may consequently lead to teachers’ attrition. Bình stated his intention of leaving the job and claimed it is the case for many teachers, he said, “*I know a lot of teachers are frustrated, we work too much but get paid too little.*”

The attrition intention of public school teachers also stems from the conflict between their bản (the anchoring self) and the typical bản. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is an interplay between BSTT and BSCN. While the collectivist values suppress the resistance against the typical bản, bản allows teachers to have a sense of resistance. This resistance emerges when teachers’ bản conflicts with the typical bản, as participants pointed out:

I know a lot of teachers are frustrated. For me, I am planning to stay in the profession a bit more, and then maybe I'll quit if I find something more suitable for me (Bình).

We are always able to come back to our core self (bản chất). That is why a lot of teachers changed their working environment after some time (Vũ).

It is too restricted to be a teacher, so I think if we don't fit in, we might just try something else that is more suitable for us (Nhu).

Without such conflicts, resistance might not occur: *"I am a traditional person, so I think it is comfortable to be a teacher in Vietnam"* (Vinh).

The discussions in this section reveal a profound connection between teachers' bản sắc and the society in terms of high societal standing, societal role, low incomes, and income disparities. Notably, low incomes and income disparities due to subject hierarchy are unique for public school teachers. This is a significant contrast to bản sắc of international school teachers, which is discussed in [Chapter 9](#).

The following section addresses changes in teachers' bản sắc in relation to changes in society.

8.3.3 Changes in society and changes in teachers' bản sắc

As discussed in [Chapter 7](#), bản sắc is fluid and constantly evolves as individuals negotiate meanings through interactions within social groups and society. This suggests that changes in society inevitably have implications on bản sắc.

Public school teachers believed that education had become increasingly industrialised as public schools had started to become financially autonomous (Trang). Policies issued by the Vietnamese government and the Ministry of Finance (e.g., Decree 43/2006/NĐ-CP, Decree 16/2015/NĐ-CP, Decree 60/2021/NĐ-CP, and Circular 56/2022/TT-BTC) allow public schools to opt for financial autonomy (Ministry of Finance, 2022). These schools can be partly or fully financially autonomous. However, it is important to note that even when public schools are 100% financial autonomous from the state budget, they still operate in the public sector because human resources and financial spending in those schools are still under state management (Ibid.). As the financial sources of these schools often come from tuition fees, more parents now view education as a service industry, according to Trang. She elaborated, *"Nowadays, there is this trend – a lot of people view education as a service industry."* This shift aligns with the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles, which emphasise free markets (Ball, 2007), limited state intervention, and competition among schools (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Olssen and Peters, 2005). This notion is further discussed in [Chapter 10](#).

As a result, a Vietnamese cultural tradition, high regard for teachers, have been disrupted. Trang said, *"Apparently, education is not a service industry, but because of this, the respect for teachers has declined"*. However, as Linh pointed out, *"Yes, I think our societal standing has been declining, but again, it is a tradition to respect teachers, so I think to some extent, we are still*

respected in society”. However, efforts to make public schools financially autonomous have been slow, with significant resistance from parents who fear rising tuition fees (Phạm, 2018; Ngọc Hào, 2013).

Another significant change in society impacting teachers’ bản sắc is the growing public attention to students’ mental health. As discussed in subsection 8.2.2, the education at public schools traditionally valued a teacher-centeredness approach where teachers, as superiors, often asserted authority through fear. This dynamic was historically reflected in corporal punishment, which was common in the public system (Ogando Portela and Pells, 2015; UNICEF, 2018). As Linh recalled, *“In the past, if a student misbehaved, teachers would hit him/her really hard. Although there is right and wrong in hitting students, if parents heard about it, they would hit their child more”*. In recent years, however, this practice has been eradicated due to shifts in social values and changes in education policies. For example, Circular 06/2019/TT-BGTĐT – on standards for teachers’ behaviours – explicitly prohibits teachers from using corporal punishment (MOET, 2019a). Similarly, Decree 04/2021/NĐ-CP imposes administrative fines on teachers who engage in such practices (Vietnamese Government, 2021). Under Vietnam’s criminal law (Vietnamese Parliament, 2015), teachers who resort to corporal punishment may face criminal prosecution.

Linh reflected, *“Nowadays, we can’t carry out physical punishment on students. If we do, students’ parents would come to the school and make a scene, and the teachers would be in trouble”*. This shift has resulted in tension in teachers’ bản sắc as teacher-student dynamics have been redefined. On one hand, it allows for the development of positive relationships with students:

I think my students adore me, and outside of school, I still go out to have food and drinks with my students. On my days off, my students also want to come over to my place to hang out (Binh).

My students appear to adore me, some even paid me a visit after graduation (Huong).

On the other hand, it diminishes the authority and respect traditionally afforded to teachers:

Now my students do not fear me. I heard about cases when students had violent behaviours toward their teachers (Nhu).

In the past, students feared teachers, but now teachers are afraid of students. Nowadays, students act up a lot, the class is like a flea market, but we can’t hit them, we can’t say harsh things to them. We can only shout and plead them to behave (Linh).

These examples indicate that bản sắc of teachers shifts due to changes in society, consistent with Wenger’s theory of identity formation (2016). According to Wenger in an interview with Farnsworth and Kleanthous, identity formation is a dynamic process that occurs through interaction with society (2016). He explains that identity is constructed through a relational process by which individuals and their environments mutually shape each other:

As a learning concept, identity suggests the construction of sameness through change – the work of being an enduring entity through time and space. And it brings in identification,

which is a relational process by which the world and the person can enter into and constitute each other.

(Farnsworth et al., 2016, p.147)

It also aligns with Mead (1934) who posits that society evolves as individuals reinterpret and renegotiate symbols, norms, and meanings through social interaction. From Vietnamese cultural perspective, Phan (2010) notes that Vietnamese culture is not only stable but also fluid. This means Vietnamese culture is open for changes by learning from other cultures including those of the West (Ibid.). However, this process of learning is not a mimicry but rather a selective adaptation – integrating new ideas while preserving the core elements of Vietnamese cultural and national identity (Ibid.). These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that societal change is inevitable, especially in the context of education reform. As such, *bản sắc* of public school teachers, deeply embedded in Vietnamese society, always continues to evolve in response to the ever-changing society and education landscape.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an understanding of public school teachers' *bản sắc*, arguing that *bản sắc* of public school teachers is inextricably connected to the Vietnamese society. This connection is reflected in how public schools echoes Vietnamese socialism and collectivist values. Consequently, *bản sắc* of public school teachers extends beyond their immediate working environment, encompassing their roles in society. Thus, *bản sắc* of public school teachers is not static but fluid and evolving, reflecting changes in society. The key takeaways from this chapter are:

- In the work environment, public schools act as platforms for national identity development practices of patriotism, social hierarchy, social harmony, and cultural traditions. These values have shaped their *bản sắc* through the negotiation with the typical *bản* when navigating themselves in the work environment.
- In Vietnamese society, public school teachers' *bản sắc* reflects their roles and standing in Vietnamese society. While traditionally held in high regard, shifts in societies have disrupted this tradition. For instance, the industrialisation of education has reframed schooling as a service industry, challenging the societal standing of teachers and altering teacher-student dynamics. Simultaneously, increased attention to students' mental health has led to a decline in hierarchical relationships, further reshaping teachers' roles and teacher-student dynamics. Moreover, subject hierarchy creates the opportunity to earn extra income outside of school for teachers of highly valued subjects, while leaving teachers of less valued subjects to struggle to make ends meet. These income situations are unique for public school teachers.

- The chapter finally underscores the implication of changes in society on teachers' bản sắc. As Vietnamese culture, traditions, value and belief system evolve, so too will bản sắc of public school teachers, highlighting the fluid nature of bản sắc in a rapidly changing landscape. This sets the stage for further discussion on bản sắc of public school and international school teachers as a whole in chapter 10 of the thesis.

The following chapter discusses bản sắc of international school teachers, in the work environment and Vietnamese society.

Chapter 9: Bản sắc of International School Teachers

9.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed how both groups of teachers conceptualise bản sắc and explored bản sắc of public school teachers. Bản sắc, as conceptualised by research participants, is multi-layered, grounded in and across the temporal, social, and spatial domains. The outermost and expansive layer of teachers' bản sắc is national identity – being Vietnamese. Nested within this is bản sắc tập thể (BSTT), reflecting teachers' collective identity as members of various social groups (e.g., family, friend groups, city), including being teachers. At the inner layer lies bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), informed by one's unique meaning-making processes across various social groups in BSTT. At the core is bản, formed through the filtered down and internalised values from other layers. Societal expectations construct a typical bản, acting as a mould that shapes teachers' self-perception and behaviour (see Figure 7.1).

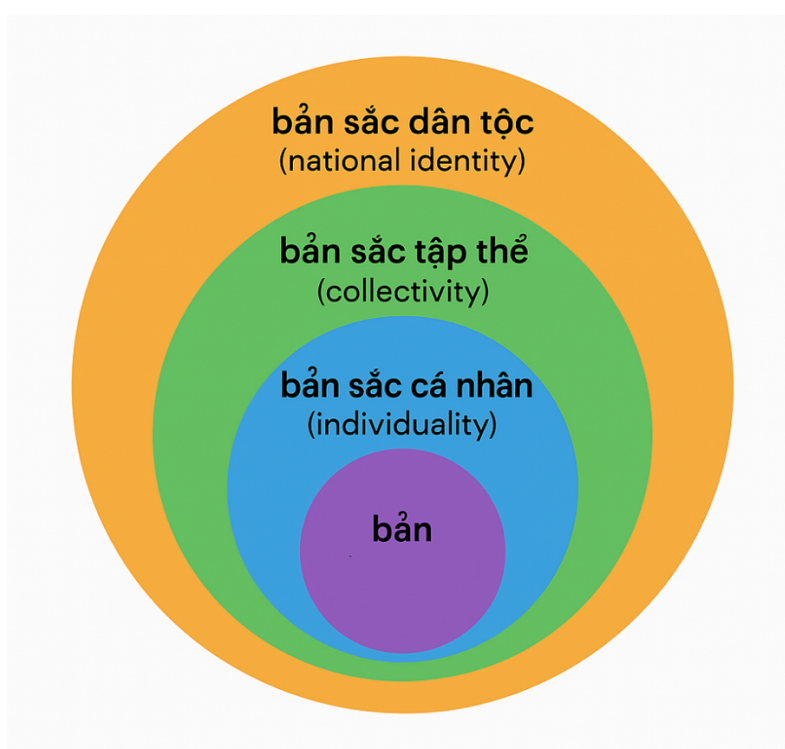


Figure 7.1: Research participants' conceptualisation of bản sắc (from Chapter 7)

Moreover, the multi-layered construct of teachers' bản sắc is grounded in and across three intertwined domains: temporal, social, and spatial. It evolves over time but always within the social and spatial contexts of their work environment and Vietnamese society. Based on this conceptualisation, this chapter discusses bản sắc of international school teachers in their work environment (social domain) and Vietnamese society (spatial domain), while the temporal element is

woven throughout the discussion. The discussion in this chapter is further supported by postcolonial theory.

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the terms “West” and “non-West/ East” in this thesis are not used to indicate fixed geographical regions or to reinforce colonial binaries. Instead, these terms serve to critically examine how colonial power has shaped dominant discourses and contributed to epistemic imbalances. This thesis understands “Western” influences as sets of cultural norms, values, and practices that are not rooted in Vietnamese traditions. These influences include but not limited to English, individualism, cosmopolitan capitals that are often associated with international schools (see [Chapter 5](#)). To further challenge the colonial binaries, terms like “non-West” or “indigenous” are avoided; instead, “local traditions” is used in this chapter to depict Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems embedded in the collectivist and socialist frameworks.

The chapter is structured into three main sections. [Section 9.2](#) examines bản sắc of international school teachers in the work environment, which embodies both local traditions and Western influences in the teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-school leaders dynamics, the use of languages (English and Vietnamese), the curricula, and teachers’ beliefs. This section also casts light on the cultural hierarchies at international schools, manifested through linguistic (English dominance), socio-economic, and epistemological hierarchies, and internalisation of these cultural hierarchies. [Section 9.3](#) discusses bản sắc of international school teachers in Vietnamese society by examining the connection between international schools and the wider society, teachers’ societal standing, and societal role. [Section 9.4](#) discusses how teachers navigate their bản sắc between the local traditions and Western influences by incorporating identity theories of Ortega (2001, 2016) and Wenger (1999).

Throughout the chapter, comparisons to public school teachers are made where relevant.

The chapter concludes by addressing the tensions and nuances in bản sắc in relation to postcolonial theory before synthesising key findings, laying the foundation for the discussion in [Chapter 10](#).

9.2 Teachers’ bản sắc in their work environment

This section explores bản sắc of international school teachers by examining the interplay between the local traditions and Western influences at international schools. The Western influences are reflected in the teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-school leaders dynamics, and the use of English. The local traditions are evident in the curricula, teachers’ beliefs, and the use of Vietnamese language.

Throughout this section, illustrative images are included. As discussed in [Chapter 6](#), these images were sourced from Google Image searches, informed by the researcher’s hand sketches during the field trip (see [Appendix K](#)).

9.2.1 The hybrid environment

Due to the lack of universal definitions of international schools, as outlined in [Chapter 5](#), this thesis seeks to how teachers define international schools in Vietnam before discussing their bản sắc in the work environment. According to focus group participants, there are three types of international schools: Fully international schools, which only offer international curricula (e.g., International Baccalaureate (IB), General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), A-level); Bilingual international schools, which teach a combination between international and the Vietnamese National Curriculum; and international schools, which operate both fully international and bilingual programmes functioning as two separate sectors. For clarity, I refer to them as type A, type B, and type C schools, respectively. These schools could be further classified into nationally established or privately funded schools. According to focus group participants, all type A schools are fully foreign invested, while Type B and Type C schools can be partially foreign invested and chained schools. Regardless of the type of investment, international schools are often considered private schools, according to participants.

All international school teachers in this study work in Type B and Type C schools. At these schools, the curriculum combines some elements in the Vietnam's national curriculum with international curricula such as IB, A-level, GCSE. Importantly, such combination varies among international schools. Hà provided an example:

For the first few years, my school offered all subjects from the local Vietnamese curriculum, with additional Cambridge subjects such as science, ESL, and ICT. Then after a few years, as we thought this curriculum was somewhat heavy, we decided to offer a combined curriculum. Moreover, in 2018, MOET started the curriculum reform for public schools, and we had permission to combine the science subjects of the new national curriculum with our Cambridge science. So instead of teaching Maths, Physics, and Chemistry with 3 different teachers in the national curriculum, and an additional Science subject with a total of 8 lessons a week, now we only teach 6 lessons a week. It is less heavy this way and at the same time, we still provide students with adequate knowledge, and students can also master both their Vietnamese and English.

Participants' classification of international schools aligns with Type C schools as defined in Hayden and Thompson (2013) and Bunnell et al. (2016). Table 9.1 summarises typologies of international schools as defined by research participants and in former studies. These various typologies suggest that definitions of international schools in Vietnam remain somewhat ambiguous. Nonetheless, a consistent theme across these classifications is that international schools provide an alternative to the Vietnamese public education.

	Research participants' definition	Hayden and Thompson (2013)	Bunnell et al. (2016)
Type A	Fully international school Fully foreign-invested. No state budgets. International curricula such as IB, GCSE English-medium. Fee-paying. <i>Align with type C in Hayden and Thompson (2013), Bunnell et al. (2016).</i>	Traditional international schools Cater to children of globally mobile families. Associated with the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) English-medium Fee-paying, run on a not-for-profit basis.	Traditional international schools Similar to Hayden and Thompson (2013). Those schools' claim to be international may not be legitimate.
Type B	Bilingual international schools Partially foreign-invested. No state budgets. Combined curriculum: Vietnamese national curriculum and international curriculum (e.g., IB, GCSE, A-level). English-medium. Fee-paying. <i>Align with type C in Hayden and Thompson (2013), Bunnell et al. (2016).</i>	Ideological international schools Dedicated to education for global peace and/or the philosophy of Kurt Hahn The core principle is international mindedness. Do not exist as a response to a pragmatic market demand.	Ideological international schools Similar to Hayden and Thompson (2013). Aim to incorporate a global perspective into their curriculum (e.g., IB, GCSE, A-level). Those schools' claim to be international may be legitimate.
Type C	International schools with two sectors: international and bilingual Partially foreign-invested.	Non-traditional international schools Private ownership. Growing rapidly in the "developing world" (Ibid.,	Non-traditional international schools Similar to Hayden and Thompson (2013). Largely market-driven.

No state budgets.	p.7).	Less altruistically driven than
Bilingual sector:	Student populations are often	Type A and Type B schools.
Combined curriculum:	composed almost entirely of	Fee-paying.
Vietnamese national	nationals of the host country.	The legitimacy of the claim
curriculum and	Cater to affluent local	of Type C schools to be
international curriculum	families.	international is impacting the
(e.g., IB, GCSE).	English-medium.	legitimacy of Type A and B
International sector:		schools.
International curricula		
such as IB, GCSE.		
English-medium.		
Fee-paying.		
<i>Align with type C in</i>		
<i>Hayden and Thompson</i>		
<i>(2013), Bunnell et al.</i>		
<i>(2016).</i>		

Table 9.1: Typologies of international schools

International school teachers view their working environment as unique (Hồng, Hà) with individualised education (Hà). Research has pointed out that an international school can be a “physical representation of a third space” (Fitzsimon, 2019, p.276), which may result in the complex identity of local teachers as they don’t align themselves completely with either local traditions or Western influences.

Western influences

Teacher-student dynamics

During interviews, international school teachers consistently described their relationship with students as “positive”:

I think my students adore me (Hồng).

My students open up to me easily (Hà).

My students are very comfortable around me, and they don’t shy away from me (Hoa).

Even outside the classroom, in informal spaces such as the schoolyard, students interacted with their teachers in a friendly manner (Hồng, Hà). Some teachers claimed that they viewed students as friends and equals (Thịnh) and described their interactions outside of class as enjoyable and occasionally playful, including teasing (Hà). Unlike public school teachers, non-hierarchical

relationships are evident in the teacher-student dynamic at international schools, as teachers pointed out:

I hope the students whom I have brought happiness to will grow up to be good and happy people. They might not be the most knowledgeable or the most skilled, but I hope they will have a good and comfortable time at school without any pressure (Hà).

I have to teach in a way that my students would adore me. It is impossible to expect every student to be outstanding and to have a good grade, but I would do my best given the students' ability (Minh).

These non-hierarchical relationships reflect features of individualist societies as defined by Hofstede (2011). They contrast sharply with the Vietnamese hierarchy of role, where teachers are traditionally seen as superiors and often feared (Yang and Tamney, 2011; Tran, 1999).

The educational philosophy of international schools appears to actively support this non-hierarchical dynamic. Interview data and observations revealed that international schools embrace student-centeredness and prioritise student autonomy, contrasting with public schools (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)). The school's physical setup further fosters student-centeredness, as confirmed by a headteacher. For instance, the class size of international schools is no more than 24 students per class, according to Hà. At the observed school, the student-teacher ratio was 13:1. A headteacher at the observed school said, *"The school's core values recognise the significance of childhood and the uniqueness of every child to grow and fulfil his or her potential."* This example reflects individualism that prioritises personal accountability, the ability to make free choices, striving for self-fulfilment, and respecting others' autonomy (Waterman, 1984). The school's core value also contrasts with socialist education ideologies: *"Education needs to train the students to be useful citizens for Vietnam"* (Ho Chi Minh, 2000 in Cam-Lien and Long, 2021, p.215).

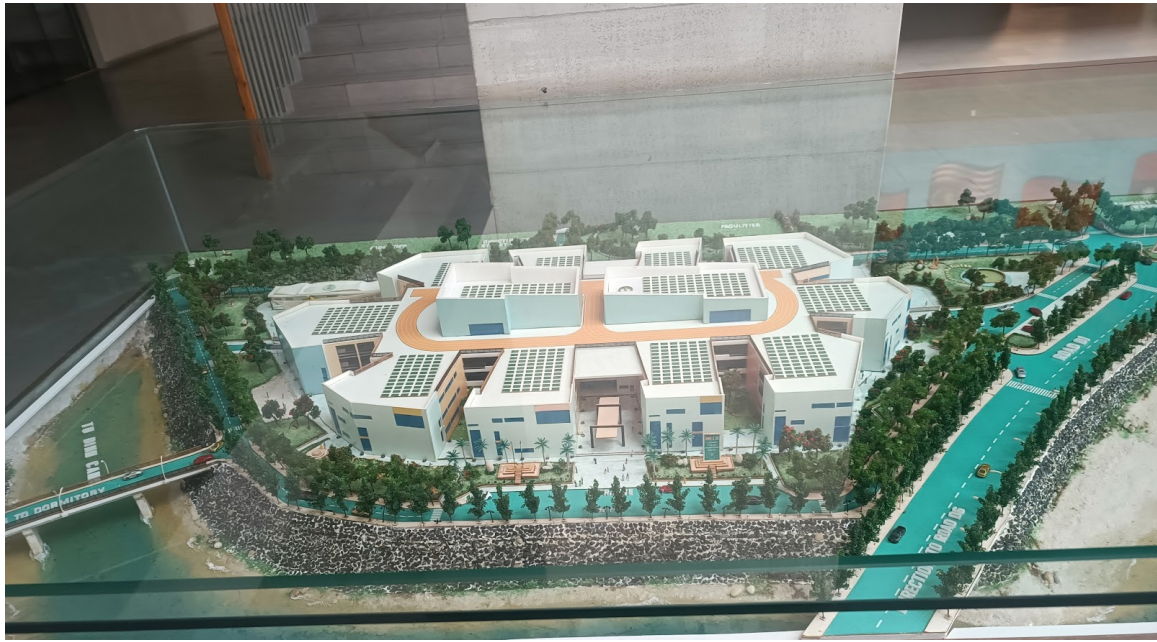


Image 9.1: The layout of the observed international school (Photo taken by the researcher during school observation)

Unlike the traditional public school setup, the observed school lacked a raised platform for the teacher's desk, symbolising the absence of a formal hierarchy in the classroom (see Image 9.2). Additionally, homeroom classrooms were furnished with individual desks, giving students flexibility to move for group activities or independent tasks, according to a teacher. Classrooms maintained privacy by keeping doors closed during study periods and face outward (see Image 9.1). These observations suggest an absence of group-based values compared to public schools (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.3](#)).



Image 9.2: Classroom layout (Source: Google image)

The teachers-students dynamic at the observed international school suggests a less hierarchical to approach to relationships than public schools. Notably, while public school teachers pointed out that they were expected to maintain a distance and uphold an authoritative figure (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)), such expectations were not mentioned by international school teachers during the interviews. This contrast highlights that the typical *bản* – the mould for *bản sắc* – is less pronounced for international school teachers compared to their public school counterparts.

Teacher-teacher dynamics

At international schools, there is often a mix of expatriates and local staff, according to interview and observation data. In terms of the dynamic with other local teachers, participants described it as positive, friendly and supportive, but not tight-knit. Thịnh said he could communicate well with everyone but was not close to them. Both Hồng and Minh, although they described the environment as friendly and comfortable, and the basis of communication was cooperation. As Minh explained:

I don't have anything to talk to them about. Actually, we do talk, but some don't teach my subject. I talk to the homeroom teachers when I have problems, or I need some handouts. But we are friendly with each other.

Hoa echoed this sentiment, highlighting that relationships among teachers were centred on achieving shared goals, particularly providing students with the best support. He stated, *“With the support from other teachers, other departments, and the school’s well-being group, we work together*

to solve problems, problems related to students.” This task-focused approach reflects the prioritisation of goal achievement over personal connections, a characteristic of individualist societies (Hofstede, 2011; Kim et al., 1994). Notably, participants did not address any social hierarchy due to age differences, contrasting with the traditional collectivist values where age often dictates status (Ibid.). The absence of age hierarchy in teacher-teacher dynamics also contrasts with public schools (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)).

In terms of interactions with expatriate teachers, findings revealed complex cultural hierarchies between Western and local staff at international schools. This dynamic and its implications are further explored in [subsection 9.2.2](#).

Teacher-school leader dynamics

A non-hierarchical relationship is evident in the dynamic between teachers and school leaders. During interviews, participants expressed comfort in discussing their school leaders and described the relationship as supportive and positive (Yến). Therefore, they felt their voices were heard (Hồng), their well-being was taken care of (Hoa), and their school leaders created a comfortable and healthy working environment for teachers (Trung). Yến shared:

My leaders are all very nice, and they really know how to lead; they don't rule, but they guide. So for me, working at an international school until now, I always feel respected, my leaders are very knowledgeable, but they never make me feel inferior to them.

Yến's quote conveys a comparison between leaders at international schools and Vietnamese traditional leadership roles. Due to the social hierarchy of roles, it is a common perception in Vietnam that leaders often dictate and give top-down orders (Mills, 2024). Similarly, Trung claimed he felt equal to his school leaders, a sentiment that diverges significantly from the norms of Vietnamese social hierarchies.

In Vietnamese workplaces, superiors and subordinates are traditionally viewed as existentially unequal, with the hierarchical system rooted in this perceived inequality (Hofstede et al., 2005). In such a system, less powerful members accept unequal power distribution as the norm (Hofstede, 2011). In contrast, individualist values characterise short power distance where both lower-level employees and higher-level managers view each other as fundamentally equal; hierarchical structures are seen as practical frameworks rather than symbols of existential inequality; and roles are subject to change based on situational needs (Hofstede, 2011).

All participants in this study grew up in Vietnam and were educated within the public school system, where social hierarchies are a significant part of their bản sắc (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)). As a result, their experiences with non-hierarchical relationships at international schools stood out as a stark contrast to their ingrained cultural expectations. Thus, when reflecting on this dynamic,

Yến referred to it as “*luck*”, emphasising its unexpected and positive nature: “*I’m lucky to have leaders who are supportive and treat us as equals.*”

The teacher-student dynamic, dynamics between teachers, as well as between teachers and school leaders, in international schools reflect the influence of individualist values, particularly the non-hierarchical relationships (Hofstede, 2011). These features sharply contrast with the collectivist and hierarchical norms of Vietnamese society, underscoring the cultural shift experienced by local teachers working in international schools. This interplay between cultural frameworks highlights tension in bản sắc of international school teachers, signifying the complex and evolving nature of teachers’ bản sắc.

Languages

At international schools, English is the main language of instruction and communication, according to focus group participants. Teachers claimed that the “*international*” nature of their working environment required them to speak English. For example:

Our tendency to use English reflects a speaking habit. Because we have to speak English at work, for example, during our school meetings and academic meetings, we have to speak English. Because even if there is one expat teacher in the group, we have to use English, otherwise, they wouldn’t understand (Vũ).

Because we teach the international curriculum, there is a lot of academic vocabulary in English. We also use those vocabulary words in teacher training, so over time, they have become a habit (Trung).

This international nature then formed an English-speaking habit among international school teachers outside of their work environment. Minh said:

During my self-reflection, I found that there are some Vietnamese words that are shorter than English words but I still use English, not because they are shorter with clearer meanings. It is because of my reference at that moment. In the same dialogue, today I chose to use Vietnamese words to express that meaning but tomorrow I will choose to use English words with the same meaning. It is a normal habit.

As they developed an English-speaking habit inside and outside of the work environment, bản sắc of international school teachers has been shaped around the “I” consciousness, fostering the emergence of BSCN. According to Hofstede (2011), the “I” consciousness, evident in the nature of the English language, is a feature of individualist societies. Linguistic studies highlight that in English, the pronoun “I” is always capitalised, regardless of its position in a sentence, symbolising the centrality of individual identity (Hinkel, 1999, 2005). English also prioritises clarity in pronoun use (Biber et al., 1999), contrasting with Vietnamese, where pronoun choice reflects social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships (e.g., thầy-con, anh-em, cha-con). Discourses in English, thus, reinforce

individualism where personal identity, self-awareness, and autonomy are valued (Kagitcibasi, 1997; Triandis, 1995). Philosophers like Descartes (2017), with his famous declaration “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am), encapsulate the growing focus on the “I” in individualist Western societies. It is indicated that discourses in English have prioritised BSCN over BSTT in international school teachers.

However, the adoption of English is not an uncritical assimilation. Teachers negotiate their bản sắc, preserving local traditions and resisting pressures to conform fully to Western influences. Research participants confirmed this notion by expressing resistance to having a native-like accent¹⁰:

I think my English doesn't have to be native-like, as long as we have close relationships. And I don't need to be ashamed of this as this is how I preserve my own bản sắc (Hồng).

Some of us still have our Vietnamese accent. We don't try to have an English accent (Hà).

The rejection of native-like English accents reflects the decolonisation of the language, as postcolonial speakers adapt English to their local contexts, signifying resistance to the postcolonial linguistic hierarchies (Lukitasari, 2020; Savski, 2020). Teachers also denied the influence of English on their bản sắc by highlighting the urge to preserve their national identity:

People tend to think that speaking English would risk losing our national identity, but for me, it is not the case (Hà).

I still use Vietnamese in conversation, so for me, things related to identity, culture, and customs will not be lost (Trung).

Such a resistance reflects a process of negotiation between local tradition and Western influences, aligning with Bhabha's concept of hybrid identity. Bhabha (1994) argues that identity is not fixed or binary but is shaped through negotiation between cultural positions. While English shapes teachers' bản sắc around the “I” consciousness, the national identity prevent teachers from full assimilating into this Western influence in the “international” environment. Local traditions at international schools are discussed in the following subsection.

Local traditions

Unlike public schools, collectivist values and socialism such as patriotism, social harmony, social hierarchy, moral education are not prominent at international schools. For example, there was no flag salutation rite or whole-school activities every morning at the observed school. According to a headteacher, only once a month, all students in the school get together to be informed of general issues. Moreover, only a few subjects from the Vietnam National Curriculum are incorporated into

¹⁰ Native like English accent refers to a way of speaking English that is very similar to that of a native speaker – those whose English is their first language, typically in an English-spoken country (e.g., the US, UK, Canada, Australia, etc.) (Episcopo, 2009).

bilingual programmes, such as Vietnamese Literature, Civic Education, History, and Geography. Notably, unlike public schools, National Defence Education – a subject that often transpires socialist values such as national pride, patriotism, responsibilities toward the nation (Vietnamese Parliament, 2018) – is not included in the curriculum at international schools. However, since Vietnamese Literature, Civic Education, History, and Geography are taught in Vietnamese by Vietnamese teachers, certain local traditions still exist at international schools.

Moreover, at type B (bilingual schools) and type C schools (schools offering both fully international and bilingual programmes), there is interference from the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV); some teachers, especially those who taught subjects from the Vietnam National Curriculum, were civil servants, according to Vũ and Hà. They were obligated to join meetings and conferences organised by the Department of Education and Training (DOET) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Those teachers were also responsible for spreading the CPV ideologies within the school. Vũ said, *“In my school, I always have to do the ideology work with expatriate teachers to make sure they understand the social elements of Vietnam.”* Moreover, participants stated that their schools still celebrated national holidays such as Independence Day, Tet holiday, Vietnamese Teachers’ Day, and traditional festivals. The existence of local traditions at international schools echoes Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP:

The curriculum of foreign-invested schools must demonstrate the education goals without contents causing harm to the national defence, national security, or the community benefits; must not include religious education and distortion of history; must not have negative impacts on the Vietnamese culture, morality, and fine custom; and must ensure the connection among learning and training levels.

(Vietnamese Government, 2018, Section 4, Article 37, Clause 1)

In addition, international school teachers uphold their local traditions, such as morality and respect for teachers. At the observed site, when communicating in Vietnamese, teachers and students used hierarchical pronouns (e.g., thầy/cô - con/em), with honorifics. Teachers also expected the students to be lễ phép¹¹ (well-behaved), nghe lời (obedient), and expected to be respected by their students. Hà said, *“They are “lễ phép” and remember to use honorifics, most of the time. In some cases when they somehow cross the line, their friends would correct them.”*

These practices highlight the enduring role of local traditions in the shaping of teachers’ bản sắc, despite their engagement in an international environment. The public education that these teachers went through has developed national identity and align with Vietnamese collectivist and socialist values (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.1](#)). Moreover, according to the conceptualisation of bản sắc (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.1](#)), teachers’ bản (the anchoring self) has been established before

¹¹ Lễ phép is an appropriate attitude toward older people, using appropriate language, showing gratitude, politeness, manners, and respect.

one becomes a teacher. Thus, when navigating themselves in the international environment, teachers are able to preserve certain local traditions while resisting Western influences in their bản sắc. Vũ said, “Usually, we base on our bản to navigate ourselves in the work environment.”

The interplay between the local traditions and Western influences echoes Bright and Poole (2025)’s observation of cosmopolitan nationalism at international schools in Vietnam. This cosmopolitan nationalism aims to balance the preservation of Vietnamese national identity with the globalised education (Ibid.). In this light, juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and nationalism could construct a paradoxical identity (Wright et al., 2022).

Such an interplay also suggests a hybrid third space, aligning with Hong (2025), Fitzsimons (2019), and Emenike and Plowright (2017). Drawing from Bhabha (1994), this hybrid third space at international schools is both a conceptual and physical space, which is the result of cultural contact, interaction, and sometimes clashes. At international schools, different sets of values interact, challenge, negotiate, and transform each other, and hybrid bản sắc arises through the process of negotiation between cultural differences and languages. This hybrid bản sắc challenges the exclusive authority of hegemonic Western influences. For example, international school teachers refused to speak with native-like English accents while preserving local traditions in teacher-student relationships (i.e., respect for teachers, hierarchical language). Therefore, the hybrid bản sắc could be “problematic of colonial representation... that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal so that other ‘denied’ knowledge enters upon the dominant discourse and estranges the basis of its authority” (Ibid., p.156). However, in the hybrid third space, there exist cultural hierarchies, which are discussed in the next section.

9.2.2 Cultural hierarchies in the hybrid environment

In the hybrid third space, Vietnamese teachers navigate their bản sắc by preserving local traditions while adopting aspects of Western practices which are often deemed “international” at international schools (Tanu, 2018). Such Western influences diminish a hierarchical dynamic between teachers with students, colleagues, and school leaders. Nevertheless, at international schools, there exist different kinds of hierarchies that are different from the social hierarchy at public schools (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)). At international schools, there are cultural hierarchies among expatriates and local Vietnamese teachers, manifesting in linguistic hierarchy, epistemological hierarchy, and socio-economic disparities, positing a superior-inferior dynamic between Vietnam and the West. This section discusses the cultural hierarchies at international schools and their implications on teachers’ bản sắc.

The linguistic hierarchy

The dominance of English at international schools has not only shaped bản sắc of teachers around the “I” consciousness and strengthened their BSCN over BSTT (as discussed in [subsection 9.2.1](#)) but also reflected a linguistic hierarchy. Teachers considered English proficiency essential for professional success, given the need to work with expatriate colleagues and teach subjects in English (Hồng, Hoa). Some participants noted the benefits of using English, such as enhanced learning and ease of teaching (Hoa, Minh).

However, teachers believed that English proficiency had created division among Vietnamese teachers in the school. For example, Trung highlighted:

Vietnamese teachers who can speak both English and Vietnamese appear more confident and more respected than those who only speak Vietnamese or are not good at English. Although there is no clear distinction in school policies, I can feel it in the daily social communication at the school. I think it is because those who can speak both English and Vietnamese can communicate with both local and expat teachers, so they fit in better.

Postcolonial critics argue that prioritising English in international schools reinforces Western cultural dominance over local cultures (Brock-Utne, 2000; Schmidt, 1998; Tikly, 2004; Tanu, 2018). Bourdieu’s analysis of colonial linguistic relations contends that by positioning English as the dominant language, it becomes a marker of social distinction and reinforces the superiority of Western cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1986). Furthermore, Ngũgĩ (1986) contends that language serves as a conduit for culture, encapsulating values, traditions, and collective awareness. The repression of native languages could disconnect people from their identity, cultivating a feeling of their origin as inferior. This cultivates insufficiency and reliance on colonial languages and perspectives, hence perpetuating colonial power systems (Ibid.). Teachers’ experiences exemplify this notion, implying the discursive relation between the language of the former coloniser and the colonised, whereby the former is constructed as superior to the latter. This linguistic hierarchy emphasises the language of the former coloniser at the expense of the Vietnamese language. This phenomenon aligns with Young (2020), arguing that the power in institutional ratification employs a hierarchy of languages, enforcing the dominance of the language of the colonial power over local languages.

The imposition of Western superiority through language thus has implications on bản sắc of international school teachers. On the one hand, English proficiency enhances their perceived value and further strengthens their BSTT through a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the linguistic hierarchy implies social disparities among local Vietnamese teachers as those with less English proficiency struggle to belong, further diminishing their BSTT. This situation could be problematic as the sense of belonging to international schools appears to be determined by Western influences at the expense of local traditions. This further contributes to the diminishing of BSTT in international school teachers while an additional social group – the social group of international school teachers – is formed, adding a layer to their bản sắc (see Figure 9.1). Consequently, it shaped their bản sắc in Vietnamese society, which is discussed in [Section 9.3](#).

While the income disparities among public school teachers are determined by subject hierarchy (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.2](#)), income disparities among international schools are dictated by English proficiency – a prerequisite for global success through which colonial power is reinforced (Brock-Utne, 2000; Tikly, 2004; Tanu, 2018). Trung said, *“Vietnamese teachers with better English ability are paid higher than those with weaker proficiency in English.”* Tanu (2018) argues that English proficiency is a form of cosmopolitan capital, which serves as a tool for asserting racialised or class-based identities. It further perpetuates class structures and social stratification in teachers’ work environments (Wright, 2024). This cosmopolitan capital, therefore, delineates differences according to colonial notions of race and culture, acknowledging as “international” only those cosmopolitan practices that favour Western cultures (Tanu, 2018). It aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), illustrating how English proficiency is often linked to higher societal standing and economic mobility, creating inequities within the school. As a result, social stratification occurs among local Vietnamese teachers in their work environment.

The socio-economic hierarchy

The income disparities not only apply to local Vietnamese teachers but also to teachers of different races. At international schools, there is a combination of expatriates and local Vietnamese staff, in which expatriate staff are further divided into white and non-white, according to Trung. Thinh believed the mix of teachers from different races reflects multiculturalism. However, there is an implication of class structures reflected in disparities in payment scales. Trung pointed out:

There is a vast difference in the payment scales for expatriates and Vietnamese teachers. But among the expatriates, those who are white and from developed countries such as the US, UK, and Australia are paid more than non-white teachers who are from other countries such as the Philippines or India.

He further emphasised that Vietnamese teachers had the lowest pay among all teachers, *“Even though we have the same skills, same experience, our salary is lower than theirs.”* Such a situation indicates that the white Western teachers are viewed as superior to the rest of the staff, placing them on top of the cultural hierarchies and socio-economic structures. This notion echoes Hammer (2021) who has found a “split salary” situation between the Vietnamese and expatriate teachers. It further underscores othering and whiteness superiority (Ibid.). Likewise, Gibson and Bailey (2023) reported that non-white teachers at international schools were marginalised, paid less, and confined to lower-status roles. These hierarchies portray white, Western-educated, native English-speaking teachers as embodying “authentic” international expertise while relegating local teachers to secondary roles (MacDonald, 2006; Tanu, 2018). This phenomenon resonates with the coloniality of power, where white Western peoples were seen as superior, while the locals and other non-white peoples were marginalised (Quijano, 2000).

The epistemological hierarchy

At international schools, the cultural hierarchies also reflect in the prioritisation of Western knowledge. Trung said, *“Even for local Vietnamese teachers, if you have a degree from overseas, you are paid higher”*. My experiences during the field trip to Vietnam resonate with his observation. In an informal conversation with international school teachers, they said, *“You will secure a high position at an international school if you decide to come back to Vietnam after your PhD”*. Echoing this notion, Minh, during the interview, expressed his intention to pursue further education abroad. Similarly, during my field trip to follow up with interview participants, Trung was in preparation to pursue his PhD in a developed country. The preference for Western epistemology aligns with Grimshaw (2015) and Ruecker and Ives (2015), who highlight the prioritisation of Western-educated teachers in the hiring practices of “international” institutions and in ESL teaching in Asian countries.

Additionally, according to Hoa, teachers must acquire certain “skills” to be able to secure employment at international schools. She said, *“To work at international schools, we must have high proficiency in English, the ability to collaborate with expatriate staff, familiarity with international curricula, and experience in international work environments.”* Hoa’s observation aligns with the hiring requirements of international schools outlined in Chapter 2 (subsection 2.6.4). These skills signal a consistency with cosmopolitan capitals (i.e., English proficiency, Western knowledge, international experiences), underpinning the superiority of Western epistemology. According to Lai et al. (2016), local teachers’ identities are marginalised in many international schools due to the dominance of Western expatriate staff’s epistemologies and teaching practices. This notion further indicates that Vietnamese teachers who are well-versed in the national curriculum or culturally grounded pedagogies are marginalised, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges the epistemology of the West.

This phenomenon reflects Orientalism, a process through which Western knowledge is positioned as superior and the local is seen as backwards (Said, 1995). The epistemological hierarchy also reflects common criticisms that international schools promote Eurocentric ideas and educational neocolonialism, reinforced by the capitalist system and its links to colonial legacies and global economic systems (Tanu, 2018; Rizvi, 2009a; Crossley and Tikly, 2004; Hammer, 2021). By doing so, international schools risk estranging the locals from their cultural roots, reinforcing a stratified global order aligned with colonial ideologies (Tanu, 2018). As Hage (1998) argues, cosmopolitan cultures gain value by exoticising the marginalised, while asserting their dominance through the cultural hierarchies.

The internalised cultural hierarchies

The cultural hierarchies at international schools shape teachers' bản sắc by fostering an internalised sense of inferiority. For example, when addressing the linguistic hierarchy, Hồng said, *"We speak English all the time at work, but it is not something negative because I can learn a lot from expat teachers, such as work ethics and communication skills"*. Although describing the socio-economic structures as *"unfair,"* Trung admitted, *"It is already decided, we can only work hard to improve our values."* Trung's reflection echoes Hammer (2021) who contends that Vietnamese teachers at international schools often feel powerless and constantly feel the urge to prove their competence. Such internalisation mirrors the dominance of Western epistemologies as rational, modern, and progressive (Said, 1995). Santos (2015) in *Epistemologies of the South* argues that colonialism eradicated non-Western knowledge systems, fostering the belief in Western superiority. Similarly, Rodney (2018) observed that Western technologies and lifestyles were introduced as aspirational models, further entrenching this hierarchy.

Additionally, the internalised cultural hierarchies are evident at international schools when expatriate staff are exempted from adhering to Vietnamese social norms. For instance, Minh and Yén said:

I don't know why, but we have this expat, he is not even American or European, and there was a day when he only wore a T-shirt to work. But if I wear something like that, I will be in trouble (Minh).

There was one time I saw a male expat teacher smoking outside the school, the parents didn't say anything. But I believe if he were a Vietnamese teacher, he would get in trouble (Yén).

International school teachers internalised the cultural hierarchies by applying the Vietnamese social norms only to their fellow Vietnamese colleagues:

There is this female expat teacher, one day she wore a low-cut dress, but no one said anything, and I also thought it was very normal. But if I see a Vietnamese female teacher dress like that, I wouldn't find it appropriate (Minh).

As claimed by Thịnh, international schools promote multiculturalism, which he considered to be beneficial. However, the internalisation of cultural hierarchies at international schools conflicts with this concept. While multiculturalism seeks to address systemic inequalities (Banks, 2015), international schools' socio-economic hierarchy contradicts the cultural equity principle. By undervaluing local staff economically and epistemologically, international schools perpetuate systemic inequalities and fail to model the mutual respect that multiculturalism advocates. In this regard, international schools perpetuate the *Oppressors-Oppressed* dynamic – The oppressed are often fearful of freedom as they internalise the perspective, value, language of the oppressor and begin to see the world through the lens of their oppressors (Freire, 1970). While participants expressed resistance to dominant Western influences by preserving local traditions in teacher-student

relationships and denying the influence of English on bản sắc, they also internalised systemic inequalities, embodying Freire's notion of oppression.

In the work environment of international school teachers, there are tensions between local traditions and Western influences, reflecting hybridity in their bản sắc. Moreover, the prioritisation of Western epistemologies at the expense of local's and the internalisation of cultural hierarchies reflect colonial power. This phenomenon is consistent with critiques that posit international schools as reinforcing educational neocolonialism (Tanu, 2018; Spring, 2008; Crossley and Tikly, 2004). Consequently, teachers have to constantly negotiate between different sets of values, which may extend beyond the work environment. The next section discusses bản sắc of international school teachers in Vietnamese society.

9.3 Teachers' bản sắc in Vietnamese society

Section 9.2 has discussed how work environments have steered bản sắc of international school teachers toward hybridity. In the wider society, Vietnamese people traditionally highly value the roles of teachers and thus construct the typical bản around expectations for teachers (see Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.3). Since international school teachers tend to develop a hybrid bản sắc in their work environment, it is worth exploring their bản sắc in Vietnamese society in terms of their societal roles, societal standing, and how they navigate bản sắc outside of the work environment.

9.3.1 The connection between the work environment and wider society

As discussed in Chapter 8, public schools embody Vietnamese collectivist values and socialist principles, and their connections to the local communities are clearly stated in Circular 28/2020/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2020d). However, there is a tenuous connection between international schools and the Vietnamese society, as it is not indicated in policy documents (see Chapter 2, subsection 2.6.3). This tenuous connection was also confirmed by research participants. Unlike public school teachers, only a few of teachers at international schools were civil servants despite the existence of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in type B (bilingual schools) and type C schools (schools offering both fully international and bilingual programmes), according to Hà. Even if they were, they were rarely invited to national education events organised by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) such as Graduation exams, Entrance exams, National Excellent Student contests, etc. Moreover, MOET didn't manage teachers who were not civil servants. This eliminated teachers' opportunities to fully participate in the national education activities. Hà shared an experience, *"I remembered a time when MOET posted recruitment for teachers moving to Laos to teach Vietnamese. I ticked all the boxes except for the one that I must be a civil servant."* In addition, Vũ pointed out that the connection between teachers' working environment and society depends on the type of international schools. For teachers working in type B and type C schools, this connection, although

not prominent, still existed. Meanwhile, interference from the CPV or MOET did not exist in type A schools (schools offering only international curricula and fully foreign-invested) (Vũ). According to participants, despite being situated in Vietnam, some of those schools completely ignore Vietnamese value and belief systems *“They are the ones who erased this connection”*, said Vũ.

According to teachers, school policies could also limit their educational engagement in Vietnamese society by restricting their interaction with students and students’ parents outside of school hours. Hà said, *“It is forbidden to interact with students and students’ parents, including social media. If we wish to do so, we have to gain permission from students’ parents and the school board.”* Hà’s experience contrasts with public school teachers as relationships between public school teachers and their students extend beyond school boundaries (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.3](#)). Moreover, private tutoring outside of school hours, which is a common practice for public school teachers (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.2](#)), can also be forbidden for international school teachers, according to Trung. Moreover, educational activities beyond the school, such as conferences, seminars, or public speeches, that could potentially affect the school’s reputation are often restricted. As a result, teachers have limited opportunities to connect and socialise with colleagues from other schools. Trung remarked:

I don’t engage much in the teaching communities outside of school, a part of it is because of my school policies, which don’t allow such activities. It means that as teachers at the school, we are not allowed to go outside and engage in conversations or speeches. Because it would affect the school’s reputation.

Consequently, international school teachers do not see themselves as representatives of teachers in Vietnam. Instead, they view international school teachers as a separate “community”. Hồng said:

I have to admit it is a weakness that the community I am a part of doesn’t represent Vietnamese teachers. It is because I only interact with international school teachers, expat teachers, and teachers who have never taught at public schools. And I think the number of public school teachers is greater, greater than our community. So I don’t think I represent Vietnamese teachers in our society.

As discussed in [Chapter 7](#), a teacher’s BSTT is shaped by their memberships in various social groups, one of which is ‘being a teacher.’ Hồng’s quote suggests a partial detachment from this social group, indicating a dual position. She identifies as a teacher yet simultaneously feels detached from the social group of Vietnamese teachers in her BSTT. This perceived detachment indicates that working in an international school may cause a disruption in teachers’ BSTT, thereby complicating their bản sắc in the wider society. Hà echoed the same view:

My work environment is unique and different from the public school environment. So we are different from teachers in Vietnam.

These examples indicate a strong sense of belonging among teachers to the work environment and a noticeable detachment from the social group of Vietnamese teachers in BSTT. This suggests that international school teachers view themselves as a distinct social group. Drawing from a sociological perspective on identity, international school teachers identify themselves and those in their social network as the in-groups and public school teachers as the out-groups. By making such a distinction, international school teachers strengthen their sense of belonging to their in-group (Sedikides and Brewer, 2015; Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2015; Brewer and Roccas, 2015) while excluding themselves from the collective of Vietnamese teachers in society. Drawing from cosmopolitan capital concept, teachers' proficiency in English, the ability to collaborate with expatriate staff, familiarity with international curricula, and experience in international work environments have enabled them to gain employment at international schools, consequently forming their own social group.

This social group formation echoes the notion of “us” and “others” (Said, 1995) when “us” refers to those possessing cosmopolitan capitals and “others” signifies the local population. Tanu (2018) describes this phenomenon as a paradox of cosmopolitanism: while it functions as a symbol of inclusivity, it also serves as a basis for exclusion. As a result, an additional layer to their BSTT is formed (see Figure 9.1), further differentiating them from their public school counterparts.

This resulting layer further reflects teachers' societal roles and standing in Vietnam, which are discussed further in the next section.

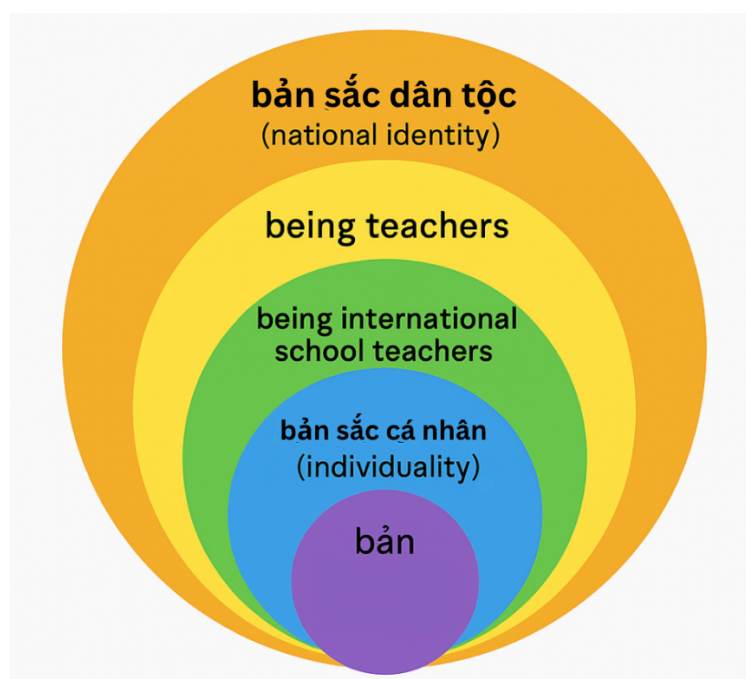


Figure 9.1: Conceptualisation of international school teachers' bản sắc

Figure 9.1 depicts layers in bản sắc of international school teachers. Similar to public school teachers, the outermost layer is bản sắc dân tộc (national identity) – being Vietnamese – which plays a

fundamental role in shaping who they are. Nested within the national identity is bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) signifying the collective identity informed by multiple social groups memberships; and all teacher is member of the same social group – being a teacher. However, international school teachers possess an additional layer in their BSTT, which is “being international school teachers”. The inner layer of bản sắc is bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN), which is informed by individuals’ unique meaning-making process across their various social groups. At the core lies bản, which contains values filtering down from all layers through internalisation and negotiations. The layer of BSCN and bản is consistent with public school teachers. It is important to note that other social groups – such as family, friend groups, or citizenship – are also parts of BSTT and exist within the same dimension, though they are not depicted here.

9.3.2 Hybrid bản sắc in Vietnamese society

Societal standing

Similar to public school teachers, international school teachers stated that they are respected in Vietnamese society due to the traditions of “*Tôn sư trọng đạo*” (Respecting the teachers). They said:

Vietnamese cultural values dignify the role of teachers. Teachers are highly respected. When we say someone in our family is a teacher, others will show respect (Hà).

We are respected because we bring value to society. Now my relatives, whenever they see me, they would call me ‘teacher’ (Trung).

However, international school teachers perceived themselves as being less respected than public school teachers (Yến). Yến explained that this discrepancy stems from the nature of their working environment, where education is seen as a commodity to be purchased rather than a public good provided to society. Some teachers viewed international schools as business enterprises rather than purely educational institutions, especially in the organisation of international schools. Yến said, “*My school doesn’t have a school board like public schools but a CEO and direct managers like a corporation*”. Consequently, they often perceive the parents of students as customers whose demands must be met. Minh articulated this perspective:

Students and parents are the most important customers in the school, and I know international schools would try their best to meet their demands so that parents won’t move their kids to another international school.

Similarly, Yến said “*parents see us more as a service provider than an educator*”. Having worked at a public school in the past, Yến compared the experiences:

Students’ parents at international schools are not like those in public schools. Public school parents spoke to me in a very respectful way, like ‘my child is struggling with this, could you please help him/her with this?’ But international school parents focus more on

their benefits as paying customers, they would say things like ‘I gave you the money, so you have to do this.’

This dynamic aligns with the broader discourse surrounding neoliberal capitalist principles underpinning international schools (see [Chapter 5, subsection 5.4](#)). Neoliberal capitalist principles emphasise the privatisation of public assets and services, including education, alongside market-oriented values, competition, and efficiency (McChesney, 2001; Peters and Tesar, 2017; Hastings, 2019). The experiences of international school teachers in this study echo these notions. Participants were aware of the competitive nature among international schools (Minh), framed teacher-parent relationships as service provider-customer relationship (Trung, Hà, Minh, YẾN), and highlighted the role of money (YẾN). These neoliberal capitalist influences further shape the sense of belonging and societal standing of international school teachers compared to public school teachers. As a result, the traditional respect for teachers in Vietnamese society has been disrupted, with international school teachers feeling less respected than public school teachers by student parents.

Moreover, international school teachers also stated they didn’t receive the same respect from society as public school teachers. Participants pointed out that this was because of the difference between the educational values at international schools and societal expectations for education (Hà, Hồng, Thịnh). In particular, they said:

Teachers are expected to be responsible for students’ outcomes (Hà).

We don’t put pressure on students when it comes to their grades. Here, they learn life skills rather than theories. They learn social skills and develop their core values, such as honesty. Our students would rather leave their papers blank than cheat in the exams (A headteacher at the observed site).

I do not support exam-focused education (Thịnh).

So I wouldn’t be considered a good exam-training teacher (Thịnh).

While public school teachers also perceive their societal standing as diminishing (see [Chapter 8, section 8.3.3](#)), the challenges faced by international school teachers appear more pronounced. This is partly because international schools embody neoliberal capitalist principles more explicitly, such as competitions among schools, privatisation, commodification of education, and high tuition fees. In contrast, public schools continue to uphold Vietnamese traditions despite neoliberal reform policies (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.3](#)). In this sense, the distinction between public schools and international schools reflects the neoliberal capitalist influences within the Vietnam’s education landscape, where public schools primarily serve the general population and international schools cater to the local paying customers. Additionally, while Vietnamese society places strong expectations for teachers to produce excellent outcomes from students, international schools don’t employ such an educational approach. Consequently, while public school teachers grapple with a perceived decline in their societal standing, international school teachers often view their standing as inherently lower than

that of their public school counterparts. This notion is further discussed in [Chapter 10](#), in relation to the country's education landscape.

Societal role

International school teachers in Vietnam uphold both local traditions and Western influences, yet their societal role is not as deeply embedded in Vietnamese society as that of public school teachers. Although they acknowledge the typical *bản*, they exhibit resistance to fully conforming to it, in both perception and actions. Participants mentioned expectations for meeting a set of standards of how to dress and how to behave (Thịnh, Trung, Hồng, Yến) inside and outside of school. Hà and Trung noted that teachers were expected to be the sole providers of knowledge to the students and responsible for producing excellent students, aligning with the perception of public school teachers (see [Chapter 8, section 8.3.3](#)). However, when addressing the typical *bản*, they exclude themselves from it by using the language of “other” (i.e., using the “they” pronoun, using “teachers” as a sentence subject, and reference to public school teachers). For instance:

Speaking of public education, society still blames everything on the school and teachers, including knowledge education and moral education. They think if the child does anything wrong, it is because of the education she/he receive from the school (Trung).

In general, teachers receive too much expectation, but their incomes are low, and their responsibilities are high (Minh).

Society doesn't care about how teachers treat the child as long as the child achieves good grades. They don't care about the sentimental values we bring to our students. Teachers are expected to be responsible for students' knowledge, so I feel that teachers, particularly those who work at public schools, are blamed for students' failure (Hà).

Teachers' perception of the public sector also resulted in their decision to work at international schools, Minh said:

I looked at my mother, who is a public school teacher. So I chose to work at an international school so I could earn a better income.

In contrast to public school teachers, international school teachers emphasised their ability to resist the typical *bản*, due to the student-centred approach prevalent in their schools. Trung shared:

For me, the most important thing is not the knowledge. Instead, it is my relationship with the students that has to be the priority. So I always try my best to establish teacher-student conversations at work (Trung).

Participants also highlighted that this student-centred approach diverges from societal expectations for education. According to participants:

I think society's educational values contradict the educational values of international schools and of the parents who send them there (Hồng).

At the moment, Vietnamese society values meritocracy and exam taking, while I value the quality of the teacher-student relationship. I do not support exam-focused education. My students might not learn anything in our class, but it should be fun conversations between the teacher and students, and what students would learn from those conversations (Thịnh).

This push back against the societal norms have implications on how they are viewed by the society, as articulated by Trang, a public school teacher:

For international school teachers, when they go home from work, people around them might not know which job they are doing, because international schools are like business establishments. But as a public school teacher, my neighbours know that I'm a teacher.

These notions align with the tenuous connection between international schools and the wider society, as discussed in [subsection 9.3.1](#). Therefore, the societal role of international teachers also contributes to the additional layer in BSTT, suggesting a hybrid bản sắc of international school teachers in Vietnamese society. While all participants underwent public education, national identity was developed in the past, they do not continue the practices in the work environment, unlike public school teachers. Hence, their bản sắc are not static but are continually shaped and reshaped through the negotiation between conflicts and alignment between these different sets of values. This dynamic suggests a hybrid bản sắc of teachers who are working in an “international” environment and living in a culturally rooted society.

Therefore, international school teachers develop a hybrid bản sắc both in the work environment and in Vietnamese society, as they constantly negotiate between the local tradition and Western influences without fully aligning with either. When going to work and going about their daily lives, international school teachers carry the set of values from one setting to another, therefore constantly living in the in-betweenness. The next subsection discusses how teachers navigate such hybrid bản sắc.

9.4 The navigation of hybrid bản sắc

Ortega's concept of “New Mestizas” posits that an individual is in fact a “plurality of selves” (Ortega, 2001, p.13) or “different persons in different ‘worlds’” (Ibid., p.12). She contends that the assertion about the self residing in several “worlds” might be interpreted as an ontological statement concerning the modes of existence within the environments we occupy. Ortega uses the “world” concept to explore the “multiplicitous self” when one travels from one society to another, hence moving from one “world” to another. When doing so, a person carries aspects of their identity from one setting to another. In this regard, a person lives “in the worlds” and at the same time “in between worlds” (Ortega, 2001).

In the context of this study, international schools represent a “world” dominated by Western influences, while Vietnamese society embodies a “world” grounded in collectivist and socialist

norms. When going to work, teachers live “in the world” of the hybrid third space; and when going out of work, they live “in the world” outside of this hybrid third space. However, when moving from one setting to another, they carry values from one world to another and negotiate them, making international school teachers also live “in between worlds”. For example, teachers carry the Vietnamese local traditions to the international school, which is evident in the relationship with students and preservation of the Vietnamese language (see [subsection 9.2.1](#)). When going outside of work, they carry the English-speaking habit with them (see [subsection 9.2.1](#)).

Drawing on Wenger’s multi-membership (1999) – a concept suggesting that one’s identity combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice and through participation in different communities (i.e., inside and outside of the work environment), teachers negotiate their meanings across boundaries to construct who they are. As international school teachers possess multi-membership while living “in the worlds” and “in between worlds” simultaneously, they constantly experience ambiguities and contradictions. Therefore, their *bản sắc* is always evolving and never fixed in one place; it is a work in progress. As Alarcdn states, *“The paradoxes and contradictions between subject positions move the subject to recognise, reorganise, reconstruct, and exploit difference through political resistance and cultural productions in order to reflect the subject-in-process”* (Alarcdn, 1996, as cited in Ortega, 2001, p.5). This means, confusion is essential for teachers to understand that they are different persons in different worlds. Being tugged in opposite ways by the rules, customs, beliefs, etc. of separate worlds causes confusion (Ibid.), adding complexity to *bản sắc*. Thus, international school teachers feel their BSTT (when at work) both aligns and conflicts with their BSCN (when outside of work):

Sometimes I question if I am the same or a different person when I am at work and not at work. When my relatives see me, they address me by the ‘teacher’ title, but I often tell them not to do that because at that moment, I was not a teacher. Society expects teachers to behave and not behave in certain ways. I’m not 100% in support of this way of thinking, but I don’t 100% oppose it (Thịnh).

He further added:

*I’m more serious at work, but outside of work, I’m more chilled and more true to myself. But at the same time, there are certain boundaries, maybe because society constructs our *bản sắc* in a way that we have to be serious all the time. It is hard to say because sometimes I feel like two different persons, but sometimes I’m not. I have this habit, sometimes when I drop something, I unconsciously say “shit”, both inside and outside of work. I know it is not acceptable for teachers to curse, especially in an educational environment. So I try to limit it and also explain to my students if I am caught doing it.*

This example clearly demonstrates confusion in an international school teacher when navigating himself inside and outside of his work environment, between two worlds. It corresponds with the “multiplicitous self” that endures an internal conflict, a cultural clash, or psychological

unrest, juggling the beliefs and practices of multiple settings, which are sometimes completely conflicting (Ortega, 2001).

This navigation of hybrid bản sắc further challenges the shaping of local identities toward the dominant Western influences. On the one hand, international schools may have unintentionally rendered Western hegemony in the country, aligning with critiques of postcolonial scholars (Tanu, 2018; Emenike and Plowright, 2017; Bright and Poole, 2025; Hammer, 2021; Bunnell, 2022). As a result, bản sắc of those who teach at international schools is not as deeply embedded in Vietnamese society as those at public schools. On the other hand, the endeavour of Orientalism (Said, 1995), which distinguishes the superior West from the inferior non-West, is destined to fail (Bhabha, 1994). It is because the colonial subject is shaped by a range of conflicting positions. This complexity positions the subject as both fixed and fantastical, resulting in a process that is inherently uneven, divided, incomplete, and thus potentially resistant (Easthope, 1998). Through confusion, ambiguity, and negotiation of bản sắc in two different worlds, international school teachers dismantle the dichotomy between the “us” and the “others”, the coloniser and the colonised, as well as the West and the non-West. In doing so, they challenge colonial authority through which colonial powers seek to reshape the identities of colonised populations within a standardised global framework (Bhandari, 2022; Papastergiadis, 2021 in Bhandari, 2022; Bhabha, 1994). This act of challenging is evident in their efforts to preserve national identity – for instance, by intentionally avoiding native-like English accents, denying the influence of English on their bản sắc, and maintaining expectations for students to uphold morality and show respect for teachers (see [subsection 9.2.1](#)). Their national identity, which plays a foundational role in shaping their bản sắc, further supports this negotiation. The significance of national identity in this process is explored in [Chapter 10](#) in relation to the broader national education landscape.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite the process of negotiation, the internalisation of cultural hierarchies also occurs. This internalisation may contribute to a sense of inferiority, thereby inadvertently reinforcing colonial power structures. The coexistence of a hybrid bản sắc and internalised cultural hierarchies highlights the complexity and nuance of international school teachers’ bản sắc. They continuously navigate their bản sắc in a paradox: challenging colonial power on one hand while simultaneously internalising aspects of the very hegemony on the other.

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a nuanced understanding of international school teachers’ bản sắc, highlighting its hybrid, fluid, and evolving nature shaped by the continual negotiation between local traditions and Western influences. This chapter has argued that international school teachers develop a hybrid bản sắc not only within the work environment but also across their engagement in Vietnamese society. Some key takeaways from this chapter are:

- In the work environment, international schools are both conceptual and physical third spaces where local traditions and Western influences intersect. The Western influences are reflected in the non-hierarchical teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-school leader relationship, and individualism. The dominance of English in international schools further steers teachers' bản sắc toward BSCN rather than BSTT, in contrast with public school teachers. At the same time, teachers preserve elements of local traditions, especially in teacher-student relationships. The work environment also reveals the cultural hierarchies through linguistic, socio-economic disparities, and epistemology, favouring the West. To some degree, these cultural hierarchies are internalised.
- In Vietnamese society, international school teachers' connection to Vietnamese society is tenuous. They developed a distinct social group in their bản sắc, resulting in diminished societal standing and detachment from traditional societal roles. This divergence arises from the educational approach at international schools, which fosters resistance to the typical bản.
- Importantly, the hybrid bản sắc signifies a paradox, within which teachers continue to negotiate between different sets of values. They constantly experience confusion, ambiguity, and the non-stop process of meaning negotiation. This in turn challenges the standardisation of identity imposed by colonial powers and disrupts the colonial narrative (Bhabha, 1994), demonstrating that international school teachers continuously (re)define their bản sắc within the interplay of local traditions and Western influences. At the same time, if they continue to internalise the cultural hierarchies, they could reinforce Western hegemony and disrupt the hybrid bản sắc.

The following chapter synthesises the key findings and discusses these two groups of teachers in relation to the education landscape in Vietnam.

Chapter 10: Discussion

10.1 Introduction

This study explores the *bản sắc* (identity) among teachers in the public and international schools within the context of Vietnam's education reforms, particularly Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP. These policies aim to align Vietnam's education system with international standards, reflecting broader global education agendas such as the World Bank's Human Capital Project (2020a), World Bank's Learning for All (2020b), OECD's Human Capital at Work (2024), and UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2019). The reform echoes global policy convergence, where countries adopt Western-centric educational strategies internationally promoted as best practices (Nordtveit, 2010; Ball, 2012; Spring, 2008). This situation may risk marginalising local epistemologies and traditional understanding of education.

Moreover, since the issue of reform, the growth of schools in the non-public sector, including international schools has been rapid (ISC Research, 2025a; Thống Nhất, 2023, Nguyen, 2020). In particular, In the 2023-2024 academic year, non-public schools, including international schools, made up 9.5% of all schools nationwide, a sharp increase from just 2.6% in 2018 (Thống Nhất, 2023; Nguyen, 2020). During the same period, the proportion of students enrolled in the non-public sector rose from 2.2% to 5% of the national student population (Thống Nhất, 2023; Nguyen, 2020). From 2020 to 2025, international schools also saw significant growth, with the number of schools increased by 24%, student enrolment rose by 28%, and total revenue climbed by 48% (ISC Research, 2025a). This shift reflects the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism, when education is steering toward privatisation and commodification.

In this context, this thesis examines teachers' *bản sắc*, which is conceptualised as *a dynamic ongoing process and a socially constructed phenomenon of who they are as shaped and reshaped by the social interactions within the social contexts when navigating the role of a teacher in Vietnamese society*. The following research questions has guided this study:

- RQ1: How do public school and international school teachers perceive their *bản sắc* in the work environment and Vietnamese society?
- RQ2: How has Vietnam's education reform shaped teachers' *bản sắc*?

This chapter synthesises the key findings to address the two research questions and is structured into three main sections. Section 10.2 underscores the significance of *bản sắc* as research concept, particularly in the context of Vietnam's postcolonial collectivist and socialist society. Section 10.3 addresses RQ1 by synthesising key findings on how public and international school teachers perceive their *bản sắc*. This section highlights the differences in identity formation between the two

groups, setting the stage for the discussion of RQ2. [Section 10.4](#) addresses RQ2 by analysing the broader education landscape shaped by the education reform. It considers the tension between neoliberal capitalist principles and Vietnam's socialist framework, which may in turn have implications for teachers' bản sắc.

This chapter further demonstrates how teachers' bản sắc are shaped by the interplay and potential clash between neoliberal capitalist principles and the collectivist, socialist value system of Vietnam's postcolonial society. The arguments put forward in the chapter further challenge the suitability of Western individualist frameworks of identity formation in a postcolonial country like Vietnam, where value systems differ significantly. In doing so, the chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive themselves and navigate their identities amid a continuously evolving educational landscape.

Since the term "Western influences" is used throughout the chapter, it is important to note that this thesis understands Western influences as ideas, values, and practices that are not rooted in Vietnamese traditions. These include but are not limited to individualism, English, and cosmopolitan capitals. While neoliberal capitalist principles, such as privatisation and commodification of public assets and services, often rooted and widespread in Western societies (LaMothe, 2016), this thesis treats them as a distinct set of structural forces that intersect with but are not reducible to "Western influences" in the cultural sense.

10.2 The significance of bản sắc as research concept

Before settling on the term bản sắc, I explored multiple concepts to capture teachers' identity, such as teachers' autonomy, agency, and professional identity. However, these concepts have been predominantly developed within Western societies where individualism is prominent. Such societies often emphasise personal agency; and professional identity, personal identity, and the broader societal norms are often treated as separate entities. For example, Beijaard et al. (2004), in a review of studies on teachers' professional identity, highlight that most of the research found identity to be shaped through a process of practical knowledge-building – one that involves the continuous integration of both individual and collective perceptions of what is relevant to teaching. Individual aspects such as agency and personal potential are other common focuses in research on teachers' professional identity (Coldron and Smith, 1999; Goodson and Cole, 1994, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004). Similarly, Chávez et al. (2022) argue that a sense of agency is an essential part of building a teacher's professional identity when it comes to subjective learning experiences that include positional changes. Edwards (2015), in the analysis of the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches used in research on teachers' professional identity, suggests that autonomy operates at the professional level. This autonomy positions teachers as public guardians and nurturers of the values and commitments that define the profession (Ibid.). Salokangas and Wermke (2020) also emphasise the importance of

teacher autonomy and conceptualise it into three horizontal dimensions (i.e., classroom, school, and profession) and four domains (i.e., education, social, development, and administration). Although this framework acknowledges the significant role of social contexts, the conceptualisation of bản sắc requires more than teachers' professional settings. This is because in Vietnamese collectivist and socialist society, teaching is not merely a profession but a crucial role in Vietnamese society (Ho Chi Minh, 2000; Dung and Pereira, 2022). Thus, beside the social contexts of their work environment (e.g., interactions and relationships with students, parents, colleagues, school leaders), teachers' bản sắc is also shaped by Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems.

As a Vietnamese researcher, I found it challenging to reconcile Western frameworks of identity with the features of Vietnamese society. This is because in a collective society like Vietnam, teachers' identity is tied to their societal role (Truong et al., 2017; Dung and Pereira, 2022; Ho Chi Minh, 2000). Moreover, in Vietnam, individual identity is often overshadowed by the collective (Tram and Ngoc Huy, 2021), which results to a different approach to understanding identity compared to Western frameworks. For instance, a Google search for the term 'bản sắc' typically yields results such as bản sắc văn hóa (cultural identity) and bản sắc dân tộc (national identity), reflecting a dominant emphasis on identity of the collective. This collective-oriented understanding of identity is also evident in how research participants conceptualised bản sắc (see [Chapter 7, section 7.2](#)). Therefore, had I used Western concepts of 'autonomy', 'agency', or 'professional identity' with my research participants, there would have been a real risk that my participants would struggle to fully grasp these concepts, not only due to the absence of direct linguistic equivalents but also because these terms may not align with their lived experiences and ways of life. Moreover, considering that language plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of the local population (Ngũgĩ, 1986), I was compelled to conceptualise identity using Vietnamese language. In Vietnamese, the meaning of words often defines conceptual understanding. Bản sắc, constructed from bản (self) and sắc (colour), can be interpreted as "the colour(s) of self." In this sense, Western frameworks on identity in English do not fully reflect the authentic meaning of bản sắc.

I only encountered the term bản sắc when searching non-academic sources in Vietnamese language. Only then did I come across published books on bản sắc văn hóa (cultural identity) by Vietnamese authors such as Nguyen (2014), Phan (2010), Ngô (2014) which did not appear in English-language search results on Google scholar. This situation reaffirms Eurocentrism in academic research, where only sources published in English in 'reliable' peer-reviewed journals are considered legitimate. Such a situation echoes the linguistic dominance influencing what is written, what is considered publishable, translatable, or worthy of academic attention (Young, 2020). As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), language is not neutral; it carries colonial power, influencing the construction of thoughts and knowledge. As a result, epistemological knowledge produced in other languages, particularly by scholars from the Global South, is systematically marginalised (Pennycook, 1998; Mignolo, 2003; Altbach, 2007). Santos (2015) argues that colonialism, capitalism, and modernity have led to the

systematic erasure of indigenous non-Western knowledge systems, presenting Western epistemology as universal, objective, and superior. This exclusionary approach neglects knowledge traditions outside the Western framework, particularly those from the Global South.

Thus, my thesis incorporates features of Vietnamese society – a postcolonial collectivist and socialist country – to explore how Vietnamese teachers perceive who they are. To conceptualise *bản sắc*, I incorporate socio-constructivist theories on identity (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Dewey, 1986; Wenger, 1998, 1999), Asian and Latin-American theories of self and identity (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Ortega, 2001, 2016), as well as Vietnamese books on cultural identity (Phan, 2010; Ngô, 2014). In doing so, my thesis conceptualises teachers' *bản sắc* as *a dynamic, ongoing process and a socially constructed phenomenon. It is shaped and reshaped through social interactions within social contexts as teachers navigate their roles in Vietnamese society.* The emerging concepts from the conceptual framework (see [Chapter 7](#)), such as *bản sắc dân tộc* (national identity), *bản sắc tập thể* (BSTT), *bản sắc cá nhân* (BSCN), and *bản* further reinforce the culturally rooted nature of *bản sắc*. These concepts have confirmed that *bản sắc* is strongly shaped by the collective identities, which gradually filters down to form the individual identity. Different from the common focus of teachers' professional identity, *bản sắc* posits that teachers' identity is not merely about individual agency and their interaction with the environment. Instead, a teacher's *bản sắc* is deeply embedded within the social fabrics, inherently interwoven with the culture, traditions, values, belief systems, and collective consciousness of Vietnamese society.

Exploring *bản sắc* as a research concept, the thesis engages with local experiences in ways that respect the local knowledge. Rather than imposing Western frameworks, my research acknowledges that identity construction is deeply embedded in Vietnamese social fabrics. By using *bản sắc* and incorporating Vietnamese language throughout the thesis, my research amplifies the marginalised voice, resonating with Ngũgĩ (1986), who calls for decolonising knowledge by valuing indigenous languages and experiences. To further ensure an authentic representation of teachers' lived experiences, I adopted a collaborative approach, working with my research participants to co-construct an understanding of *bản sắc*.

However, my research doesn't completely devalue knowledge produced in the West. Critically incorporating the work of Western scholars such as Wenger (1998, 1999), Dewey (1986), and Erikson (1994), this thesis conceptualises *bản sắc* in three interrelated domains: temporal, social, and spatial. In the temporal domain, teachers' *bản sắc* is formed through past experiences, present realities, and the imagined future, which continuously influence one another (Wenger, 1998, 1999; Dewey, 1986). The social domain underscores the importance of social interaction in the formation of *bản sắc*. Teachers' perception of who they are is shaped through engagement with various social actors in the work environment. The spatial domain emphasises how Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems shape teachers' *bản sắc* (Phan, 2010). It also reflects teachers' engagement in social groups as identity develops through negotiating memberships across social contexts,

especially across boundaries of community of practice (Wenger, 1999). While I engage with existing identity theories from the West, these materials are interpreted reflexively and cautiously through engagement with collectivist and socialist features of Vietnamese postcolonial society. In doing so, my study seeks to avoid “*Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism*” (Brent Edwards, 2025) and embraces the “*ecologies of knowledge*,” (Santos, 2015), fostering a dialogue between Western and non-Western epistemologies rather than perpetuating epistemic domination. As such, bản sắc has become more than a culturally specific term, it has instead functioned as a potential conceptual space of resistance against epistemic injustice, pushing the boundaries of dominant Western knowledge. It has demonstrated a push against the “epistemicide” through which non-Western knowledge systems are silenced (Mignolo, 2011). By positing bản sắc as research concept, this research not only challenges dominant paradigms but also fosters space for alternative, locally rooted knowledge practices to flourish. In this sense, bản sắc operates as both a research concept and a decolonial research method, one that reclaims voice, repositions knowledge, and dismantles Western epistemological hegemony.

Bản sắc, as a Vietnamese term, encapsulates the nation’s social values, history, culture, and ways of living. This offers a more culturally grounded conceptualisation of teacher identity.

10.3 Research question 1: How do Vietnamese teachers perceive their bản sắc in the work environment and Vietnamese society?

Chapters 8 and 9 have explicitly discussed the research findings, exploring how both public school and international school teachers perceived their bản sắc within their work environment and Vietnamese society. This section synthesises the key findings, highlighting the differences in the shaping of bản sắc between the two groups. By doing so, this section lays the foundation for addressing research question 2 – “*How has Vietnam education reform shaped teachers’ bản sắc?*”

In general, research participants grounded their bản sắc in the temporal domain (through past, present experiences, and imagined future), social domain (the work environment), and spatial domain (through social groups and in Vietnamese society). However, instead of emphasising the three domains, teachers focused on the multiple layers in their bản sắc. This aligns with Markus and Kitayama’s (1998) concept of independent and interdependent self. Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) consists of multiple social groups that teachers engage in (i.e., family, friend groups, citizens of a city, and being teachers). The outermost layer of bản sắc is the national identity which is inseparable with cultural identity (see Chapter 7, section 7.2). Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN) is informed individuals’ unique meaning-making processed in BSTT. As each teacher belongs to various social groups and no social group is identical to others, BSCN is unique for each teacher and distinguishes them from one another. Bản – the innermost layer of bản sắc – is aspects filtered down from all layers to represent the inner self within each teacher. Bản acts as a reference point for teachers’ behaviours when tensions arise (see Chapter 7, subsection 7.2.2). Notably, societal expectations have constructed the

typical bản which then formed a mould dictating teachers' behaviours (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.3](#)). These layers are deeply grounded in and across the three domains. Figures 10.1 and 10.2 illustrate three domains of bản sắc and its layers.

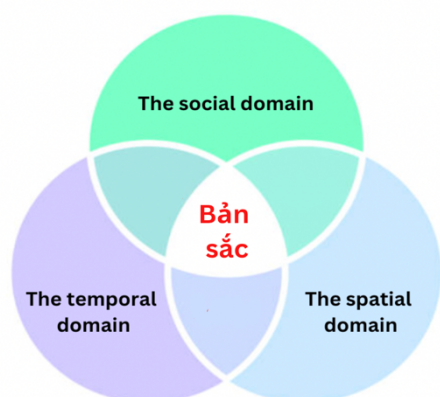


Figure 6.1: Bản sắc in three domains

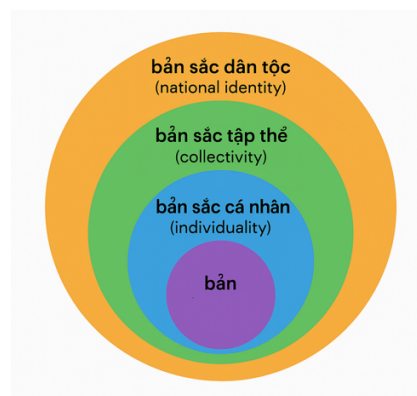


Figure 7.1: The layers of bản sắc

10.3.1 Public school teachers

[Chapter 8](#) has posited that the public schools transmit national identity (associated with socialism), social harmony, social hierarchy, and Vietnamese cultural traditions. The typical bản, shaped by societal expectations, plays a crucial part in bản sắc of public school teachers. They often feel obligated to adhere to the typical bản, even when it conflicts with their personal beliefs. By adhering to the typical bản, teachers reinforce their societal roles, creating a cyclical process of the formation of bản sắc. For example, one of the Vietnamese cultural traditions is the emphasis on morality, rooted in Confucianism. Hence, a part of the typical bản is shaped by the societal expectation for teachers to have high morality (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.4](#)). At public schools, moral education ensures that children are raised to become competent citizens who adhere to social norms (Underwood, 2020). This emphasis on morality has shaped teachers' bản sắc, as they view morality as an essential trait for teachers (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.4](#)). By internalising and reinforcing moral values, teachers further solidify their BSTT, aligning themselves with broader Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems.

In this sense, public school teachers fulfil their designated societal roles, a phenomenon consistent with Hofstede's assertion that collectivist societies emphasise social harmony, community, and conformity (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Similarly, Markus and Kitayama (1991), in their concept of interdependent self, emphasise the role of the individual within a larger social context. It was also consistent with Ho Chi Minh's ideologies on the role of teachers in socialism (Ho Chi Minh, 2011). Given such a connection with society, changes in society inevitably have led to shifts in teachers' bản sắc, echoing theories of identity formation (Mead, 1934; Farnworth et al., 2016) and the characteristics of Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2010). For example, the recent shift toward prioritising

students' well-being, marked by the eradication of corporal punishment in policies, has transformed teacher-student relationships and how teachers perceived their societal standing (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.1](#)).

However, it does not mean that public school teachers entirely lack agency or resistance against dominant social norms. Regardless of the type of society and changes within it, the process of subjectification and self-configuration (Foucault, 1995, 1978) is always in motion as an individual has an ability to reflect, resist, and redefine themselves. One of the findings reveals that when teachers' stable core self (bản) conflicts with the typical bản, they move to another public school, or to international schools (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.2](#)), or even wish to leave the profession entirely (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.2](#)). When teachers resist the typical bản through retention, the cyclical process of bản sắc formation can be disrupted. However, as contended in Chapter 7 that bản sắc is fluid ([subsection 7.3.1](#)), the disruption of the cyclical process doesn't mean that teachers' bản sắc stops evolving. Even when teachers move to another profession or another education sector, their bản sắc continues to shape and reshape within the new environment. During this shaping, the process of subjectification and self-configuration continues to occur.

Furthermore, bản sắc of public school teachers demonstrates the intertwining among the temporal, social, and spatial domains. Bản sắc in the temporal domain signified the continuous shaping of Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems from the time they went to school until they became a teacher. For instance, public school teachers went through moral education in the past and still uphold the moral values until now. Upholding the moral values, public school teachers continue to exercise them through the delivery of moral education at work. This indicates the intertwining among the three domains in bản sắc of public school teachers.

[10.3.2 International school teachers](#)

While public school teachers negotiate their bản sắc within the framework of Vietnamese collectivist values and socialism, international school teachers grapple between the local traditions and Western influences. Although both sets of values coexisted, Western influences tend to dominate within the international schools, such as individualism, the dominance of English, the use of international curricula (e.g., International Baccalaureate (IB) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)), and the student-centred education approach. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese traditions are not promoted but preserved by teachers themselves (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). This situation echoes Rizvi (2009a), who refers to globalised education in postcolonial countries as the “*Western imperialist relations*” (p.52). Consequently, international schools may have unintentionally facilitated the marginalisation of local cultural identities when favouring Western influences.

Notably, there exists a linguistic hierarchy, privileging Vietnamese teachers with higher English proficiency through better salaries and a stronger sense of belonging within the school. This is accompanied by a socio-economic hierarchy, where local Vietnamese teachers are paid less than expatriate teachers, and an epistemological hierarchy that favours teachers with Western degrees and capital (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#)). These cultural hierarchies could reinforce colonial power structures, thereby increasing the complexity of *bản sắc* for teachers in international schools, especially when the cultural hierarchies are internalised. For instance, teachers don't expect expatriate teachers to follow the societal expectation of appearance and behaviours; they also accept the fact that they are paid less than expatriate teachers; and need to constantly improve themselves (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#)). These findings align with former studies arguing that international schools are postcolonial sites, which manifest neocolonialism and perpetuate cultural hierarchies (Hammer, 2021; Tanu, 2018; Emenike and Plowright, 2017; Fitzsimons, 2019; Gibson and Bailey, 2023).

As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), at international schools, a linguistic hierarchy exists among local and expatriate teachers in the dominance of English – language of a former coloniser – leading to local teachers seeing themselves and their cultures as inferior. Thus, English embodies both coloniality and globality (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Due to globalisation, languages of the former colonisers, especially English, have become the international language, and speaking English provides postcolonial people with cosmopolitan capitals in the globalised neoliberal capitalist world (Tanu, 2018). Within this study, the prioritisation of English in international schools signifies the alienation of the local populations from their languages, and by extension, their national identities, aligning with Nguyen et al. (2009) and Ngũgĩ (1986). This is evident in teachers' adoption of English-speaking habits outside of work (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)) and their perception of English proficiency as essential for professional growth (Ibid.).

While the established cultural hierarchies at international schools may have unintentionally facilitated the decline of local cultural identities, this shaping has constructed the hybrid *bản sắc* (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). This hybridity challenges the dominance of the Western influences in teachers' *bản sắc*. First, aware of the connection between the English language and the colonial erasure of Vietnamese national identity, teachers reject having native-like English accents as a way of preserving the national identity (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). This critical awareness of colonial power in language and teachers' active resistance to its influence signifies the “decolonised mind” (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Secondly, while international school teachers perceive themselves as a distinct social group with a diminished societal standing and detachment from traditional societal roles (see [Chapter 9, section 9.3](#)), they do not entirely disengage from Vietnamese society or its value system. Despite working in an environment that prioritises Western epistemology, they continue to uphold Vietnamese traditions. For instance, they communicate with local students in Vietnamese and expect students to be *lễ phép* (well-behaved) (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). Such preservation of Vietnamese traditions prevents teachers from fully aligning with Western influences.

At international schools, colonialism and globalisation have created a hybrid third space where cultural contact fosters ongoing navigation of ambiguity, forming a hybrid bản sắc (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). This echoes postcolonial theory on the tensions local populations face between colonial influence and their local cultural norms (Bhabha, 1994; Khan et al., 2024). Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry captures this dynamic – where colonised subjects imitate but never fully replicate the coloniser's culture, revealing both the paradox and ambiguity in the interaction between local and colonial identities. It is within this imperfect mimicry that an act of resistance is found (Khan et al., 2024). Thus, in this context, international school teachers do not simply adopt Western values; rather, they engage in a process of adaptation and resistance. Therefore, while Western influences on their identity are undeniable, international school teachers continuously navigate between local traditions and Western influences, preventing them from fully assimilating into a Western framework and further enabling them to challenge colonial power.

Despite such acts of resistance, international school teachers reported the internalisation of cultural hierarchies and felt the need to prove themselves, thereby unintentionally reinforcing colonial power structures (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#)). This coexistence of hybrid bản sắc and internalised hegemony underscores another paradox teachers navigate – resisting colonial influences while simultaneously absorbing aspects of it. These paradoxes extend into teachers' daily lives beyond the work environment, as they carry values from one setting to another. This often leads to confusion, particularly when teachers struggle to distinguish between who they are as a teacher and who they are not as a teacher (see [Chapter 9, section 9.4](#)).

Bản sắc of international school teachers also reflects an intricate interplay between temporal, social, and spatial domains. Temporally and spatially, their bản sắc is shaped by the Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems they acquired during their early education and continue to uphold at international schools. Socially and spatially, they negotiate between local traditions and Western influences within both the workplace and Vietnamese society. For example, inside the work environment, teachers incorporate Vietnamese traditions by using the Vietnamese language and reinforcing traditional respect for teachers with their students. Conversely, in interactions beyond the school setting, they carry Western influences into their other social groups. This is particularly evident in their habitual use of English when communicating with other local people, including during interviews with the researcher. Additionally, bản sắc of international school teachers demonstrates the dynamic interaction between BSTT and BSCN. This interplay is particularly apparent in their alternating use of Vietnamese and English. While English fosters an “I” consciousness, reinforcing BSCN (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)), Vietnamese emphasises BSTT, as it is rooted in a hierarchical speaker-listener relationship. This linguistic shift highlights the fluid and evolving nature of their identity, shaped by their continuous negotiation between different cultural frameworks.

The research findings reveal that both public and international school teachers construct their bản sắc within complex socio-cultural frameworks. Public school teachers primarily negotiate their

bản sắc within the boundaries of Vietnamese social values, reinforcing national identity and societal roles in a cyclical process. Meanwhile, international school teachers navigate the local traditions and Western influences while simultaneously negotiating and internalising aspects of cultural hierarchies. The next section builds on this discussion by examining how Vietnam's education reform has shaped teachers' bản sắc. By situating teachers' bản sắc within the broader educational landscape, section 10.4 highlights the intersections between policy changes, national identity, and teachers' navigation of bản sắc.

10.4 Research question 2: How has Vietnam's education reform shaped teachers' bản sắc?

The context of this study is informed by two key education reform policies in Vietnam – Resolution 29-NQ/TW and Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP. Resolution 29-NQ/TW underscores the importance of international integration as an essential driver of national development. It emphasises the need to align Vietnam's education with international standards to enhance the country's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. A key principle of Resolution 29-NQ/TW is: *“Education is a national priority and the mission of the Party, Government, and the whole nation. Investment in education is an investment in development, prioritised in socio-economic development plans”* (Section B, Article I). Following this Resolution, Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP was issued. A key aspect of this decree is the establishment and expansion of foreign-invested schools, commonly referred to as international schools.

As interpreted from these policies, the drive to align national education with international standards reflects broader neoliberal discourses on global policy convergence (Nordtveit, 2010; Ball, 2012; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Spring, 2008). For example, the aim to align Vietnam's education system with international standards for socio-economic development (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013) is consistent with the frameworks of World Bank (2020a) - Human Capital Project and OECD (2024) - Human Capital at work. Furthermore, foreign-investment in education, as pushed by Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP, is moving the education toward privatisation and commodification (Kim and Mobrand, 2019), echoing World Bank's framework (World Bank, 2020b). The educational shift toward privatisation and commodification could accelerate the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism (Klees, 2020). Former studies referred to this situation as neocolonialism of education (Rizvi, 2007; Crossley and Tikly, 2004; Orga et al., 2019; Bunnell, 2022). Furthermore, the Vietnamese government has explicitly stated that international integration across all sectors, including education, is intended to support international economic integration (Ministry of Justice, 2025). In this context, the effort to internationalise education becomes less about pedagogical improvement and more about positioning Vietnam within the global knowledge economy. This approach mirrors the logic of neoliberal capitalism, where education is increasingly treated as a tool for enhancing human capital and national competitiveness in the global market (Nguyen et al., 2009; Edeji, 2024; Gray et al.,

2018). As a result, education risks becoming commodified, with its value measured primarily through economic outcomes rather than culturally rooted development. Thus, the reform might happen at the expense of locally rooted pedagogies and culturally embedded approaches to education.

However, Vietnam's position as a postcolonial, collectivist, and socialist country doesn't fully align with neoliberal capitalist principles. It is evident in these two reform policies that the education of the country is caught between preserving the country's national identity and attempting for international integration. While advocating for international integration, Resolution 29-NQ/TW particularly stresses the preservation of Vietnam's national identity, highlighting "*the country's independence, control, socialism, good customs, and culture*" (Section B, Article III, Clause 9). This suggests tension within the education landscape, which may inevitably influence teachers' *bản sắc*. This section of the chapter addresses research question 2 - "*How has Vietnam's education reform shaped teachers' bản sắc?*" by discussing the tensions in the education landscape before exploring how the reform has potentially shaped teachers' *bản sắc* and how teachers navigate *bản sắc* in the evolving education landscape.

10.4.1 The Vietnam education landscape

The national identity (bản sắc dân tộc)

Before discussing the interplay between neoliberal capitalist principles and Vietnam's socialist framework, it is crucial to acknowledge the prominence of Vietnamese national identity. National identity, according to teachers in this study, encompasses cultural values and serves as the most foundational layer of their *bản sắc* (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.2.1](#)). Moreover, reform policies consistently emphasise the importance of preserving national identity despite the attempt to align the education with international standards. Thus, this subsection argues that national identity plays a pivotal role in Vietnam's navigation between neoliberal capitalist principles and its socialist framework.

Anderson (2020) posits a nation as an "imagined community," contending that this community is tied to colonialism due to anti-colonial movements, making nationalism a cultural construct. This is particularly evident in the works of Vietnamese authors on *bản sắc văn hóa* (cultural identity) and *bản sắc dân tộc* (national identity) (Phan, 2010; Minh Chi, 2007; Ngô, 2014; Nguyen, 2014). For instance, Minh Chi (2007) defines Vietnamese national identity as comprising original, foundational, enduring, and characteristic cultural traits of the nation. Similarly, Ngô (2014) and Nguyen (2014) assert that Vietnamese cultural and national identities are deeply interconnected and inseparable. Moreover, Vietnamese national identity is strongly emphasised and constructed around socialist ideologies, anti-colonial resistance; national independence and self-determination; and especially using Ho Chi Minh's ideologies as the compass for the Vietnam Communist Party's policies (Van Duc, 2018; Nguyen, 2022; Tram and Ngoc Huy, 2021; Goscha, 2016). The education

system, grounded in Ho Chi Minh's principles, prioritises national unity, self-reliance, and collective over individual interests (Cam-Lien and Long, 2021; Le Thuy et al., 2024; Tram and Ngoc Huy, 2021). Lap (2018) contends that Ho Chi Minh's vision of education underscores the role of ideology in fostering national solidarity and resisting full alignment with capitalist influences.

As Chan (2008) points out, education in postcolonial countries often aims to resist colonial influences while celebrating and cultivating national identity. The research findings echo this notion. As posited in Chapter 8, the interrelated sets of Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief systems are reflected in education at public schools. These include socialist ideologies, social hierarchy, social harmony, moral education, “thuần phong mỹ tục¹²” (Fine customs), and societal roles of teachers. In this sense, education at public school serves as both a mechanism for knowledge transmission and a tool for ideological formation, developing and strengthening national identity in students and teachers alike (see Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.1). Thus, I contend that at public schools, the development of Vietnamese national identity echoes ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014), which interpellated individuals as socialist-national subjects. Through education, Vietnamese citizens' beliefs and behaviours are shaped in alignment with the ideology of the Vietnam Communist Party. According to Cam-Lien and Long (2021), education in Vietnam is to cultivate citizens who put the country's interests ahead of their own, who fiercely oppose foreign aggression, who work to increase output, who root out traitors who threaten the country and its people, and who ensure the country's independence and unity. As stated in Ho Chi Minh's educational philosophy, “*Education needs to train the students to be useful citizens for Vietnam, an education that fully develops the available capacities of the students*” (Ho Chi Minh, 2000 in Cam-Lien and Long, 2021, p.215). This ideological state apparatus is evident in the research findings about public school teachers (see Chapter 8, section 8.2). For example, public school teachers are obligated to attend the flag salutation rite every Monday morning and deliver moral education. By taking the ideological state apparatus in action, they reinforce the Vietnam Communist Party's propaganda. As stated in Ho Chi Minh's ideologies about the societal role of teachers, “*without teachers, socialism can't be established*” (Ho Chi Minh, 2011, p.403). Since both groups of teachers in this study were educated in the public system, their bản sắc is deeply shaped by national identity embedded in socialism.

The emphasis on national identity is also evident in the education reform policies. Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP emphasises that international schools “*must not have negative impacts on Vietnamese culture, morality, and “thuần phong mỹ tục” (Fine customs)*” (Section 4, Article 37, Clause 1). Resolution 29-NQ/TW states the need to preserve “*the country's independence, control,*

¹² A Vietnamese proverb that refers to all the good and healthy customs, traditions, moral concepts, and lifestyles of a nation. “Thuần phong”: pure customs; “mỹ tục”: beautiful, fine, or good customs/traditions

*socialism, good customs*¹³, and culture” (Section B, Article III, Clause 9), and “*maintain socialist orientation and national identity*” (Section B, Article II, Clause 1). According to Khanh and Trang (2023), even in the context of international integration, it is essential to promote the positivity of nationalism. Khanh and Trang (2023) further argues that the process of international integration is guided by learning from the development of advanced cultures in alignment with socialist ideals and, at the same time, preserving the national and cultural identity (Ibid.). The preservation of national identity while pushing for international integration, including the growth of international schools, further reflects cosmopolitan nationalism. Maxwell et al. (2020) contends that cosmopolitan nationalism highlights the intersection of global and national imperatives in education. In Vietnam, cosmopolitan cosmopolitanism is reflected in how the reform is responding to increased globalised educational goals, while still placing strong emphasis on how Vietnamese socialist goals for education. It is evident when education at public schools remains its development of national identity, preserving Vietnamese core cultural values amidst global influences (Phan, 2010).

Furthermore, in Vietnam’s international schools, cosmopolitan nationalism acknowledges the tensions between the global, cosmopolitan values and maintaining national educational goals, particularly the sustained focus on socialism rooted in Marxist-Leninist thought and Ho Chi Minh’s ideology, which continue to define Vietnamese national identity (Bright and Poole, 2025). However, given the juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, cosmopolitan nationalism could paradoxical identity in the local population (Wright et al., 2022). This notion is echoed in this study as international school teachers constantly navigate these tensions and develop a hybrid bản sắc (see Chapter 9, section 9.4). They have a strong sense of national identity while simultaneously internalising cultural hierarchies that favour Western norms and epistemologies.

The interplay between neoliberal capitalism and Vietnam’s socialist framework

State control and free market

Neoliberal capitalism is a specific ideological approach to capitalism originated and widespread in Western societies (LaMothe, 2016). It emphasises free markets, deregulation, privatisation, and the reduction of state intervention in economic affairs (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2019; Sharma, 2021). Neoliberal capitalism also intensifies the role of free markets by advocating for minimal government involvement in economic and social policies (Sharma, 2021). The research

¹³ “Good customs” is translated from “các phong tục tốt đẹp”, which is different from “fine customs” (thuần phong mỹ tục). “Thuần phong mỹ tục” is a Vietnamese proverb, meaning pure, original, and beautiful customs. “Thuần”: pure, original; “phong”: customs; “mỹ”: beautiful; “tục”: customs.

findings reveal the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist principles in both the public and international schools.

At international schools, teachers claimed that students' parents paid a high amount of tuition fees and were entitled to make demands as paying customers (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.3.2](#)). This reflects the commodification of education, where schooling is treated as a product that can be bought and sold (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006, 2010). Additionally, teachers noted that international schools feared losing students to competing institutions, indicating a highly competitive market dynamic (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.3.2](#)). This aligns with Song (2013), who argues that competition is a defining feature of neoliberal capitalist principles in education. Meanwhile, policies encouraging public schools opting for financial autonomy (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.3](#)) signifies a movement away from state control financially. This trend aligns with Ball (2012) and Klees (2020), who highlight the growing prevalence of education privatisation in the global neoliberal education reforms, where public education provision is gradually transferred to private entities. Klees (2020) posits that the driving force for this shift is neoliberal capitalism, or potentially capitalism in any manifestation. However, such transition stands in stark contrast to Vietnam's socialist framework, where state control in education has been a central principle. For instance, public schools are managed by the regional Department of Education and Training, and most teachers are civil servants (see [Chapter 2, section 2.5](#)).

Thus, there is an interplay between Vietnamese socialist state control and neoliberal capitalist free market in the education landscape, signifying a potential tension. As Foster (2019) points out, neoliberal capitalism aims to embed the state in capitalist market relations, reducing its role in social reproduction to solely promoting capitalist reproduction. This principle conflicts with the Vietnamese socialist market economy (Le, 2025). Opposite to capitalism, the socialist market economy integrates capitalist economic principles within socialist framework (Trong, 2012; Le, 2025). While neoliberal capitalism prioritises a free market with minimal government intervention, the socialist market economy emphasises state involvement (Bekkevold et al., 2020; Le, 2025). In the context of education reforms, despite the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism in both public and non-public sectors (including international schools), state control remains in both sectors. Despite the privatised structure of international schools, these schools remain subject to government oversight (see [Chapter 2, subsection 2.6.3](#)). For example, according to research participants, some international school teachers are civil servants and are managed by the Vietnam Labour Federation. Moreover, international school teachers also claimed that the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) required certain subjects from the national curriculum to be included in the curricula at international schools (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). In the public sector, despite schools' movement toward financial autonomy, they are still classified as public schools since the state continue to manage human resources and financial spending of the schools (Ministry of Finance, 2022). These practices indicate

an interplay of the state control – a feature of socialist market economy – alongside with free-market – a neoliberal capitalist principle in the education landscape.

Inevitably, such interplay has shaped bản sắc of both public school and international school teachers. As pointed out in [Chapter 8](#), public school teachers believed that their societal standing was declining due to changes in society as education has been commodified. International school teachers confirmed the same observation as students' parents often viewed teachers as a service provider rather than an educator (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.3.2](#)). Despite the Vietnamese tradition of respecting teachers, in the work environment, the role of teachers at international schools is directly embedded within the neoliberal capitalist structure, while public schools still operate within socialist framework. This explains why international school teachers perceived their societal standing as lower than their public school counterparts (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.3.2](#)).

Thus, the interplay and even tensions between neoliberal capitalist principles and Vietnam's socialist framework highlight the evolving educational landscape. It further reflects cosmopolitan nationalism, wherein global education agendas are interpreted through national and local priorities, allowing elements of nationalism to persist, adapt, and reassert themselves (Wright et al., 2022). This evolving nature of the education landscape has ultimately shaped bản sắc of both public and international school teachers.

Class-consciousness and class (re)production

In the education landscape, international schools appear to offer more education advantages than public schools. For example, public school teachers reported severely overcrowded classrooms, with up to 50 students per class, which has made it hard to ensure the quality of education (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.1](#)). Moreover, international schools often offer a wealth of facilities which are not available in public schools. For instance, the observed international schools were equipped with indoor sports stadiums, woodwork rooms, fully equipped kitchens for home economics subjects, and well-resourced chemistry and physics laboratories. These facilities were absent in the observed public school. The education advantages at international schools can also benefit their students in the global economy. At international schools, students are familiar with Western-oriented education and likely to develop high English proficiency. Existing research in different contexts (e.g., China, Indonesia, South Korea) have pointed out that these skills help secure entrance to universities abroad and employment at transnational companies (Weenink, 2008; Wright, 2024; Tanu, 2018; Lee and Wright, 2016). However, these advantages are not without contradiction. Wright (2024) and Jarvis (2020) found that students at international schools and those graduating abroad often face difficulties in securing jobs in the civil service and business sector in China and South Korea. Although there is limited research on similar experiences among international school students in Vietnam, Pham and Saito (2019) suggests that Vietnamese returnees – those who studied abroad – often encounter

“*negative cultural capital*” (p.1056). This refers to a perception held by local peers who view returnees or cultural hybrids – individuals familiar with foreign ideas – as outsiders or even rebels (Ibid.).

However, it is important to acknowledge that when neoliberal capitalism often frames education as a commodity, the aforementioned education advantages could be purchased. Given the high tuition fees (see Chapter 2, subsection 2.6.3), the majority of Vietnamese students at international schools can be from local families who are wealthy enough and willing to afford “international” education. Furthermore, the increasing number of student enrolment at international schools in the 2020-2025 period (ISC Research, 2025a) reflects the increasing wealth of local families in Vietnam, corresponding with the rapid economic growth of the country. As noted in Resolution 09/NQ-CP, Vietnam’s average GDP in 2024 stands at \$4,700, reflecting a 7% increase from 2023, positioning Vietnam 33rd among the fastest-growing economies globally (Vietnamese Government, 2025b). The expansion of international schools suggests that Vietnamese parents may be leveraging their economic capital to secure social advantages for their children. Existing research highlighting how international schools have contributed to the emergence of a new social class, often referred to as emerging middle or upper-middle class (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). This emerging social class is composed of families wealthy enough to afford high tuition fees in exchange for cosmopolitan capitals (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Tarc and Mishra Tarc, 2017; Bunnell, 2022). Bunnell (2010) argues that international education is designed to meet the social reproduction strategies of privileged classes, ensuring their children maintain or advance their socio-economic positions in a globalised world. In this regard, international schools play a crucial role in producing a new kind of local citizen, part of an emerging middle or upper-middle class in the Global South (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016).

However, as discussed in Chapter 5, the choice for international schools in Vietnam cannot solely be associated with social class but it is also ideological alignment. Therefore, in Vietnamese socialist context, the notion of emerging social class must be critically examined. A feature of Vietnamese socialism is class-consciousness, rooted on the struggle of the working class (Nguyen and Dang, 2024) rather than the capitalist social class (re)production. In socialist Vietnam, the working class is the dominant and ruling class (Loi Le, 2022; Nguyen and Dang, 2024), which is understood differently from the working class in the capitalist system: “*Under socialism, the working class can no longer be called the proletariat: it is free from exploitation, and together with the whole people, it holds the production materials*” (Nguyen and Dang, 2024, p.3). Therefore, the assumption that international schools produce a new capitalist social class could be problematic in Vietnamese context. While international schools may serve the neoliberal capitalist principles, these principles interact with Vietnam’s socialist framework. In this regard, this thesis does not argue for the emergence of a new social class in Vietnam, nor does it claim that the growth of international schools necessarily leads to deepening social class divisions. The growth of international schools should therefore be understood not as straightforward indicators of capitalist social class (re)production, but

as manifestations of a broader negotiation between neoliberal capitalist influences and national socialist principles, signifying a complex and evolving education landscape.

While this thesis does not argue for capitalist class (re)production, the research findings indicate socio-economic disparities between public and international school teachers. In particular, the opportunities to work at international schools are limited due to the required cosmopolitan capitals such as English proficiency, collaboration skills with expatriate staff, familiarity with international curricula, and experience in international work environments (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.2](#); [Chapter 2, subsection 2.6.4](#)). Some participants who graduated from the same teacher education program at the same university (e.g., Bình and Hà) now work in different sectors, suggesting that cosmopolitan capital serves as a key determinant of career trajectories. Additionally, international school teachers earn significantly higher salaries than their counterparts in public schools (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.3.2](#); [Chapter 2, subsection 2.6.4](#)), while public school teachers rely on shadow education to supplement their income (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.2](#)). This mirrors broader patterns of socio-economic stratification where the education market and the hiring practices value cosmopolitan capital, often at the expense of local expertise and traditional pedagogies. This notion suggests a reproduction of neocolonial power dynamics, aligning with Tanu (2018). As a result, public school teachers whose expertise is rooted in local curricula and pedagogical traditions struggle to compete for higher-paying positions, despite their deep understanding of national educational needs.

Recently, the socio-economic stratification between the two groups of teachers has widened due to the new policy banning shadow education – Resolution 29/2024/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2024). Since the policy has only recently been introduced, there hasn't been research on how public school teachers are coping with this new restriction. However, shadow education has long been a financial safety net for underpaid public school teachers; and it is likely that public school teachers now face even greater financial insecurity while their counterparts in international schools continue to benefit from higher salaries. Thus, the socio-economic stratification among Vietnamese teachers echoes Piketty's (2014) who argues that neoliberal capitalism exacerbates income disparities by prioritising financial interests over social equity. These stratifications stand in contrast with Vietnam's socialist framework, which does not emphasise capitalist social classes (re)production (Nguyen and Dang, 2024; Loi Le, 2022). Thus, in Vietnam's education landscape exists conflicting ideologies, implying potential clashes.

As noted by Nhung and Nghia (2024), when competing ideologies (e.g., neoliberal capitalism and Vietnam's socialist framework) exist in the same space, significant confusion occurs. This could lead to a clash of values that disrupts Vietnam's long-standing cultural system (Ibid.). This notion is reflected in the research findings. For example, for a long time, Vietnamese traditional respect for teachers has shaped their bản sắc in both their work environment and society (see [Chapter 7, subsection 7.3.3](#)). However, both public school and international school teachers pointed out that the

increasing privatisation and commodification of education has led to a diminishing of this traditional respect, disrupting teachers' perception of their societal standing (see [Chapter 8](#) and [Chapter 9](#)).

Given the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism, tensions are evident across the educational landscape and reflected in the evolving bản sắc of teachers in both groups. By positing bản sắc as a hybridity spectrum, the following section discusses how teachers navigate their bản sắc in the given education landscape.

10.4.2 The spectrum of hybridity

Given the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism in both public and non-public education sectors, including international schools, both public and international school teachers navigate a dynamic interplay of Vietnamese collectivist values, socialism, Western influences, and neoliberal capitalist principles in the education landscape. This section starts with discussing different sets of values teachers experience in their work environment and Vietnamese society. It then advances the argument that teachers' bản sắc is not fixed but exists in a spectrum of hybridity, shaped by the dynamic interplay of different value systems. This hybridity allows teachers to navigate their bản sắc within a space of in-betweenness, preserving Vietnamese national and cultural identity while engaging with Western influences in a manner that is neither passive nor entirely assimilative.

For public school teachers, their bản sắc is mainly shaped by Vietnamese collectivist values and socialism which are prominent both within and beyond their work environment. In their work environment, teachers' bản sắc is shaped by multiple interrelated cultural values: national identity tied to socialism, hierarchical relationships with students, colleagues, and school leaders, and a strong emphasis on social harmony and group-based values (see [Chapter 8, section 8.2](#)). In Vietnamese society, public school teachers' bản sắc is shaped by their perceived high societal standing and designated societal role. These are rooted in Vietnamese traditions such as “Tôn sư trọng đạo” (respecting the teachers) and socialist principles about the teaching profession (Ho Chi Minh, 2000; Vietnamese Parliament, 2019). Both within and beyond their work environment, teachers often internalise and conform to the typical bản, which reflects societal expectations regarding but not limited to morality, appearance, behaviour, and role fulfilment. Furthermore, the perceived low income and disparities among subject teachers shape their perception of how society values teachers. These cultural and structural forces reinforce bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) through which bản sắc is constructed relationally through conformity and fulfilment of societal roles. This is consistent with Hofstede's (1980) and Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theories on collectivism and the interdependent self. Bản sắc of public school teachers is also shaped by their engagement in other social groups, such as family, friends, and their identity as members of a particular community or city. Therefore, teachers continuously negotiate their bản sắc by balancing personal beliefs with the collective norms and societal expectations that are reinforced in both work environment and wider society. However, it

doesn't mean this group of teachers is not exposed to Western influences in the evolving education landscape. Some public school teachers in this study have high English proficiency as they are ESL (English as Second Language) teachers. The English proficiency reflects Western influences in terms of individualism (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)). While their work environment mirrors Vietnamese collectivist values and socialism, neoliberal capitalist principles, such as the movement toward financial autonomy, also have a foothold in public schools. Additionally, their engagement in other social groups may contain Western influences, contributing to a more complex and dynamic negotiation of bản sắc.

For international school teachers, their bản sắc in the work environment is shaped by the dominant Western influences (i.e., non-hierarchical relationship with students, school leaders, and colleagues; the dominance of English; student-centeredness education approach; individualism). There also exist cultural hierarchies favouring Western epistemologies that they tend to internalise (see [Chapter 9, section 9.2](#)). At the same time, their bản sắc is also reflected in Vietnamese traditions that they uphold through the use of Vietnamese language and expectations for respect from students. In Vietnamese society, their bản sắc is shaped by the typical bản – Vietnamese societal expectations for teacher to fulfil societal role – although they are more likely to resist this typical bản compared to public schools teachers. While Western influences are dominant in their work environment, international school teachers' national identity and their engagement in other social groups outside of work (see [Chapter 9, section 9.3](#)) prevent them from fully assimilating into the Western framework.

As both groups of teachers move between their work environment (the social domain) and wider Vietnamese society (the spatial domain), they experience different sets of values and carry elements from one domain into another. I refer to this phenomenon as the hybridity of bản sắc, drawing from Ortega's (2001) concept of the "New Mestizas". New Mestizas emphasises the "multiplicitous self" since individuals experience both "being in worlds" and "being between worlds" (Ibid.). These two states of being are neither static nor mutually exclusive; rather, individuals inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously while also existing between them (Ibid.). It is crucial to note that spatial location is not the primary factor in "being in worlds," since it pertains not just to ontic material circumstances but also encompasses the ontological modes of existence of the self (Ortega, 2016). At different moments, teachers transition from one world to another while still carrying their prior experiences and values. A teacher at work is immersed in a particular world, yet their sense of self is shaped by experiences in other worlds, such as their role in their family or cultural background, and vice versa. For instance, one participant (Phan) noted, *"Sometimes I talk like a teacher when speaking to my mom, and she has to correct me."* Similarly, when a teacher encounters an education issue outside of work, their teacher BSTT emerges, meaning they could think and act like a teacher even outside of work. Thịnh explained, *"If I read a news article about teachers or education, I can comprehend it more profoundly because I am a teacher."* Vinh also said, *"When I'm reading a book, I imagine myself in the classroom teaching the content from the book."* Moreover, when international

school teachers develop an English speaking habit outside of work (see [Chapter 9, subsection 9.2.1](#)), they bring the shaping in one domain to another.

“Being in worlds” and “being between worlds” are inherently connected, as the “multiplicitous self” does not exist strictly within one world or another but instead oscillates between them (Ortega, 2016). Similarly, *bản sắc* consists of multiple, overlapping selves that emerge in different contexts at different times. This fluidity aligns with Wenger’s (1999) concept of multi-membership, which suggests that individuals construct their identity through participation in multiple social groups and through the negotiation of meanings across different settings. Through interactions in various communities, teachers experience both familiarity and alienation, acceptance and resistance, adaptation and negotiation (Wenger, 1998, 1999). As they move across different social and spatial domains, teachers encounter conflicts and harmonies between values, which they reconcile to shape their *bản sắc* across boundaries. For example, a public school teacher in this study struggled between their personal preference for casual clothing and the formal dress expectations imposed by social norms (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.4](#)). This highlights how the hybridity of *bản sắc* allows teachers to integrate multiple perspectives, providing them with diverse ways of understanding themselves in the worlds and in between worlds.

The hybridity of *bản sắc* also resonates with Deaux and Perkins’ (2015) *Kaleidoscopic Model of Self*, which conceptualises identity as dynamic and ever shifting. Like a kaleidoscope, *bản sắc* patterns change based on perspectives, life experiences, times, and social context. For example, outside of work, public school teachers developed relationships with students that align with their personal beliefs (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.3](#)). This duality reflects Goffman’s (2023) concept of “frontstage” and “backstage” behaviour, where individuals present different aspects of themselves in different settings. Frontstage behaviour refers to the public persona individuals display in interactions with others, consciously performing roles to fit social norms (Ibid.). For instance, when at work, public school teachers act as an authority figure, adhering to the typical *bản* (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.2.2](#)). Backstage behaviour, in contrast, reflects the private self, where individuals feel less constrained by societal expectations. One international school teacher claimed that he is more

“chilled” outside of work (Thịnh). However, the distinction between frontstage and backstage is blurred in a collectivist and socialist society, where teachers remain public figures even outside of work. For example, public school teachers still feel pressure to regulate their behaviour in public settings, even when socialising with friends (see [Chapter 8, subsection 8.3.1](#)). This reinforces the multiplicitous self and multi-membership, as teachers carry their shaping of *bản sắc* between social and spatial domains.

Thus, I argue that the hybridity of *bản sắc* is not binary but rather a spectrum of in-betweenness within which teachers constantly navigate. It is important to take teachers’ social groups (e.g., families, friends, upbringing, region, the niche work environment such as the school type, location, and school climate) into consideration. This is because the combined values in BSTT result

in BSCN, which is unique for each individual teacher (see [Chapter 7, section 7.2](#)). Figure 10.3 illustrates the hybridity spectrum of teachers' bản sắc. In Vietnamese language, bản sắc consists of bản (self) and sắc (colour(s)). This indicates that bản sắc has a nature of colour (sắc), implying a spectrum (of colour) rather than a fixed category. Thus, I use the colour spectrum to depict this hybridity spectrum, integrating social and spatial domains with time elements (temporal domain).

As depicted in Figure 10.3, the vertical axis represents the shaping of teachers' bản sắc in the social domain, while the horizontal axis represents the shaping of teachers' bản sắc in the spatial domain. These two axes are embedded within the underlying temporal domain, demonstrating how bản sắc continuously evolves over time. With the multiplicitous self and multi-membership, the elements of bản sắc in the social domain and spatial domain are intertwined. Moreover, embedded in the temporal domain, different selves might emerge at different times or multiple selves might emerge at the same time, resulting in different positions of a teacher's bản sắc in the hybridity spectrum. One teacher's position in the spectrum could also shift depending on the particular social contexts they engage with at different times. The black dots in Figure 10.3 illustrate multiple positions of a teacher's bản sắc in the hybridity spectrum. These black dots also demonstrate that the positions in the hybridity spectrum vary from one teacher to another, due to the uniqueness of their BSCN and bản.

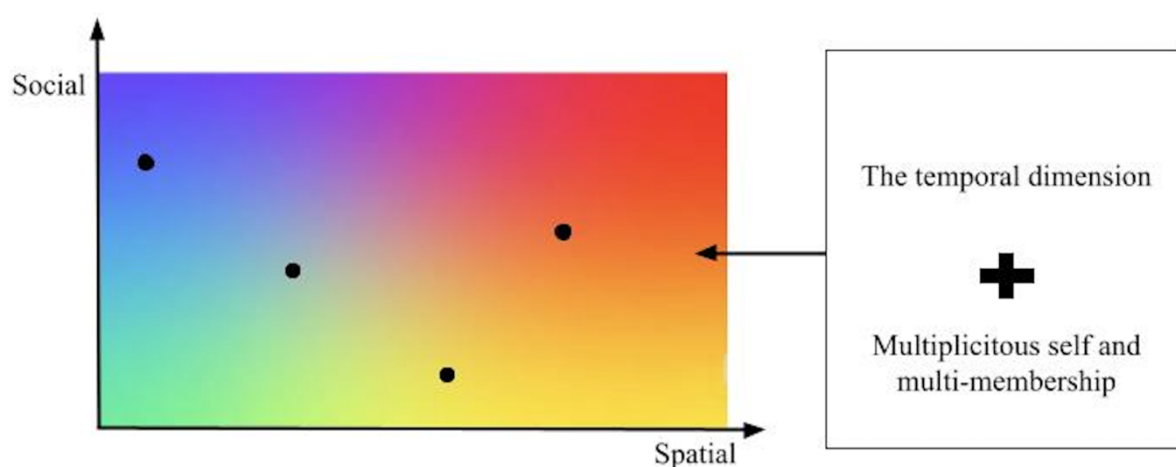


Figure 10.1: The hybridity spectrum of bản sắc

To further interpret Figure 10.3, I introduce a hypothetical character named Thúy, a Physics teacher at an international school. Thúy is also the first-born daughter in a traditional Vietnamese family, a part-time English-Vietnamese translator on weekends, and a former public school student with high English proficiency. The values associated with “being a teacher” fall within her social domain (her work environment – the vertical axis), while the values tied to other roles and social groups outside of school (e.g., family, being a translator) belong to the spatial domain (the Vietnamese society – the horizontal axis). When Thúy is at work on Monday, she encounters a student who addresses her without honorifics. Drawing on her cultural upbringing as a first-born daughter, who traditionally holds a respected position in Vietnamese familial hierarchies, she corrects

the student's language. On Tuesday, during a Physics lesson that references measurement units in inches – a unit commonly used in Western contexts – she chooses to have her students use centimetres instead, aligning the experience with the Vietnamese context. On the same Tuesday evening, at a family dinner with a relative, she forgets to bow her head in greetings (a gesture of showing respect to the elders in Vietnamese culture) since such an act is not a common practice for her at work. These examples illustrate how, depending on time, context, and social interactions, different values from different social groups intersect and influence how Thúy behaves and perceives herself. Her *bản sắc* on Monday is represented by one black dot in Figure 10.3, while Tuesday at school represents another, and Tuesday evening at home yet another. In this regard, *bản sắc* is dynamic and emergent, shaped by the overlapping of multiple values across contexts. Moreover, at a given time in a social context, Thúy's *bản sắc* may be represented by multiple black dots due to her multi-membership and as she lives “in the worlds” but simultaneously “in between worlds”. The black dots are also unique for each teacher. Thúy's positions of *bản sắc* in the hybridity spectrum are not the same as her colleague's, as their BSCNs differ.

As teachers navigate between social and spatial domains, their *bản sắc* is shaped through the dynamics among various sets of values, including Vietnamese collectivist values, socialism, Western influences, and neoliberal capitalist principles. Drawing from Ortega (2001, 2016) and Wenger (1999), teachers do not merely conform to a single *bản sắc* but actively negotiate their positions within a hybridity spectrum. Ultimately, *bản sắc* is not a fixed or binary construct but an ever-evolving identity shaped by lived experiences, social interactions, social values, and the broader forces of neoliberal capitalist influences and education reforms.

10.5 Conclusion

By addressing the research questions, this chapter has brought together the key findings to discuss *bản sắc* of both public and international school teachers within the context of Vietnam's education reform. In this chapter, I have posited that Vietnam's education reform has created a complex and evolving educational landscape, marked by the interplay and even tensions between Vietnam's socialist framework and the perpetuating neoliberal capitalist principles. These tensions have had far-reaching implications on *bản sắc* of teachers in both sectors, particularly the hybridity spectrum of *bản sắc*.

For public school teachers, *bản sắc* is deeply embedded in Vietnam's collectivist values and socialism. They navigate their roles within a system that emphasises national identity, social harmony, morality, and fine customs, often adhering to societal expectations and norms. However, the influence of neoliberal capitalism has introduced new challenges, as public school teachers must reconcile traditional values within the changing education landscape. In contrast, international school teachers operate within an environment that is directly influenced by neoliberal capitalism, where Western

influences dominate. Their bản sắc is heavily shaped by the interplay between local Vietnamese tradition and Western influences, leading to a hybrid identity that navigates Western frameworks in either passive or assimilative manners.

The concept of hybridity spectrum has emerged as a central theme in this study. Teachers in both sectors navigate their bản sắc across social, spatial, and temporal domains, constantly negotiating among multiple layers in bản sắc. They navigate bản sắc in the hybridity spectrum through the multiplicitous self and multi-membership.

As neoliberal capitalism perpetuates in the country, tensions inevitably arise within the national education landscape. At the same time, they generate spaces for negotiation, adaptation, and resistance, forming a continuously evolving education landscape. The findings demonstrate that both groups of teachers do not passively assimilate into Western influences but instead actively uphold, reinterpret, and reshape the local collectivist values and socialism in response to these influences.

Ultimately, this study underscores the complexity of teachers' bản sắc in a rapidly changing education landscape. By situating bản sắc within the broader educational and societal transformations in Vietnam, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive themselves amidst these changes. The findings suggest that bản sắc is not a fixed or binary construct but an ever-evolving identity shaped by lived experiences, social interactions, Vietnamese culture, traditions, values and belief system, and the broader forces of neoliberal capitalist influences and national education reform. It challenges the influences of Western individualist frameworks to identity in collectivist, socialist and postcolonial contexts; and highlights the importance of considering the sociocultural and historical contexts in which identity is constructed.

The following chapter concludes the thesis by outlining research contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 11: Research Contributions and Limitations

11.1 Introduction

Contextualised by Vietnam's education reform, this thesis explores how public and international school teachers perceive who they are in their work environment and in Vietnamese society. By situating *bản sắc* within the broader educational and societal transformations in Vietnam, the research further provides a nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive themselves amidst changes. This chapter outlines the research contribution to the theoretical and empirical knowledge (Section 11.2) as well as suggestions for policy (Section 11.3). Finally, research limitations are addressed in relation to suggestions for further studies (Section 11.4), followed by the conclusion marks reflecting the doctoral journey of the researcher (Section 11.5).

11.2 Research contribution

This study contributes to the research on teachers' identity in terms of theoretical and empirical knowledge. It also provides policymakers in Vietnam and potentially postcolonial countries with suggestions on disparity issues in the education landscape.

11.2.1 Contributions to theoretical knowledge

Researching *bản sắc*, this study situates identity within the Vietnam's unique societal structure, encompassing socialism, collectivist values, and postcolonial legacies. This approach ensures that an examination of identity remains authentic to local experiences. Given the lack of empirical research in this field, the study critically incorporates established theories of identity formation (e.g., Wenger, 1998, 1999; Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Dewey, 1986) and Vietnamese concept of cultural identity (Phan, 2010) to conceptualise *bản sắc* within temporal, social, and spatial domains. The theoretical framework also considers features of both collectivist and individualist constructs, thereby advancing an understanding of identity formation in Vietnamese society. In this framework, the following key concepts have emerged:

Bản sắc as a research concept functions not only as a culturally specific concept, but also as a decolonial research method that resists epistemic injustice (Mignolo, 2011) and promotes the "ecologies of knowledge" (Santos, 2015). By centring the Vietnamese language and epistemologies, this thesis challenges the dominance of Western frameworks and contributes to a more culturally grounded understanding of teacher identity in global education discourse.

Postcolonial theory provides the foundational lens for this study, not only in interrogating the lived experiences of teachers in international schools but also in critically examining the broader

structural inequalities in the education landscape. This includes questioning the power imbalances between local traditions and Western influences, particularly the economic disparities between educational sectors and the widespread of Western epistemologies as the default standards.

In this regard, the study advances decolonial approaches by foregrounding the perspectives of those often marginalised in mainstream academic discourse. Rather than imposing Eurocentric frameworks of identity, the study engages Vietnamese teachers, using their lived experiences as the basis for conceptual development. By employing the Vietnamese language that reflects local realities, this research resists hegemonic narratives and highlights the importance of local knowledge systems in shaping education discourse. Ultimately, the hybridity spectrum provides a nuanced understanding of identity formation, offering insights into how teachers navigate the tensions of a globalised yet locally rooted education landscape.

Bản sắc tập thể (BSTT) signifies the collective identity: This includes the national identity and various social groups (e.g., family, friends, region, city, profession, work environment). The term BSTT refers to the collective identity of people in the same social group. For example, BSTT of people living in Southern Vietnam, BSTT of public school teachers, BSTT of international school teachers. While the national identity plays a crucial role in shaping a uniform understanding of bản sắc within the nation, BSTT challenges the rigidity of national identity by distinguishing one Vietnamese from another and allows teachers to interpret their national identity. BSTT is also consistent with the concept of the collective self by Spears (2015) and Markus and Kitayama (1998), the concept of “Me” by Mead (1934); and theories of identity formation through social groups by Sedikides et al. (2011), Dewey (1986), and Erikson (1994).

Bản sắc cá nhân (BSCN) signifies the individual identity: BSCN is constructed by one’s unique meaning-making across various social groups in BSTT. As each teacher belongs to various social groups and no social group is identical to others, BSCN is unique for each individual and distinguishes one group member from another. This key concept aligns with Mead’s (1934) concept of the “I”. The conceptual framework posits that BSCN and BSTT are in dynamic interplay, particularly within collective societies where group values are prioritised. While BSTT influences BSCN, the latter allows individuals to navigate themselves in the social context, aligning with Wenger’s (1999) concept of multi-membership, which highlights identity negotiation across different social settings.

Bản functions as an anchor point each teacher: As shaped by filtered-down values from all layers over time, it acts as a reference point for teachers’ behaviours when tensions arise. Bản provides teachers with a coherence sense of self when navigating across various social group. Unlike Sedikides and Gaertner’s (2015) notion of the stable home-based self, bản enables continuity within change given the fluidity of bản sắc’s multi-layered construct.

The typical bản is constructed by society’s expectations for teachers, shaping a mould that informs BSTT and BSCN. In Vietnamese society, although teachers could resist this shaping, in most

cases, they often adhere to society's expectations to maintain social harmony. This key concepts is consistent with Mead's concept of The Generalised Other which refers to the internalised understanding of societal norms, values, and attitudes (1934); and Foucault's concept of subjectification – a process through which individuals are shaped into “subjects” through complex interactions between power, knowledge, societal norms, and discourses that dictate acceptable behaviour and ways of thinking (Foucault, 1995, 1978). At the same time, this subjectification is not without negotiation, given teachers' ability to reinterpret and even resist the norms.

The hybridity spectrum proposes that bản sắc is neither fully fixed nor entirely malleable but constantly mediated through negotiations. Within this spectrum, a teacher's BSCN may emerge more prominently at different points in time, aligning with Deaux and Perkins' (2015) Kaleidoscopic Model of Self, which posits that identity is fluid and context-dependent. Moreover, the hybridity spectrum suggests that teachers present different versions of themselves in different settings, consistent with Goffman's (2023) concept of front-stage and back-stage behaviours. In professional environments, teachers may conform to the typical bản while in private or more informal settings, they may express aspects of their bản sắc that deviate from these norms. Most importantly, teachers' navigation in the hybridity spectrum reflects the engagement in social groups and across social groups, aligning with Ortega's concept of “multiplicitous self” (2001, 2016) and Wenger's multi-membership (1999). This means a teacher is both being-in-worlds and being-in-between-worlds and navigate their identity across boundaries. In this study, the concept of “world” is understood as social groups or sets of values, given that each social group comprises distinct, sometimes overlapping, values. A teacher at work operates within a specific institutional framework, yet their bản sắc is continually shaped by experiences in other worlds, such as their familial role or cultural background. Bản sắc, therefore, is composed of multiple, overlapping selves that emerge in various contexts, reinforcing the interconnected nature of being-in-worlds and in-between-worlds. The hybridity spectrum allows teachers to integrate multiple perspectives acquired from diverse worlds, offering them various ways of perceiving themselves and their roles within these worlds. In such a spectrum, confusion and ambiguity are essential for bản sắc to evolve.

The concept of hybridity spectrum also aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybrid identity, especially for international school teachers. It further illustrates the paradox and ambiguity in the interaction between local traditions and Western influences. In postcolonial contexts, individuals often replicate the cultural norms of their colonisers, yet in doing so, they introduce subtle acts of resistance (Khan et al., 2024). Thus, the hybridity spectrum captures this ambiguity, as teachers navigate between ingrained national identity and the Western influences they encounter in international school settings. Such ambiguity undermines colonial authority since the colonised subject can never fully emulate the coloniser (Bhabha, 1994). Hence, hybridity subverts and disrupts the established power dynamics, creating a space for resistance and negotiation.

By establishing the above key concepts and incorporating postcolonial discourses, this study contributes to theoretical discussions on identity formation, challenging universalist and Eurocentric frameworks. It underscores the necessity of contextualised identity studies that account for the unique societal structures of postcolonial, socialist, and collectivist settings like Vietnam.

11.2.2 Contributions to empirical knowledge

This study explores the *bản sắc* (identity) among teachers in both the public and international schooling sectors within the context of Vietnam's education reform policies, particularly Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP and Resolution 29-NQ/TW. By doing so, the research lays a critical foundation for understanding *bản sắc* in the Vietnamese education landscape and contributes to empirical knowledge in several key areas.

Contribution to Identity Studies: The study develops *bản sắc* from a culturally grounded perspective within a postcolonial, socialist, and collectivist society. It challenges Eurocentric identity frameworks by emphasising the importance of examining identity formation by considering the societal structure unique to each society. The findings highlight that identity is not a universal concept but is deeply influenced by societal structures, values, and historical legacies.

Education Reform and the Two-Tiered Labour Market: This research demonstrates how education reform policies have contributed to a stratified education labour market, significantly influencing teachers' *bản sắc*. In the public sector, teachers' *bản sắc* are shaped by patriotic narratives, hierarchical relationships, group harmony, and moral education, suggesting the prominence of collectivity in *bản sắc*. Conversely, in international schools, teachers navigate a hybrid third space where their *bản sắc* exists at the intersection of local tradition and Western influences, developing hybrid *bản sắc*.

Education Reforms and the Dilemma for Policymakers in Postcolonial Countries: The research underscores the global education agendas may perpetuate Western hegemony and undermine local epistemologies. Although the influences of neoliberal capitalism are an unavoidable due to global capitalist growth, Vietnam's reform policies are caught in the dilemma between the preservation of national identity and neoliberal capitalist influences, echoing the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism.

Tensions and Negotiations: The study uncovers the tensions in teachers' *bản sắc* across both sectors. Public school teachers experience conflicts between rigid societal expectations and their personal beliefs, while international school teachers resist complete alignment with either local traditions or Western influences. The research underscores the role of resistance in identity formation. Public school teachers push back against prescribed societal expectations, while international school teachers preserve their national identity by challenging the Western influences.

The Role of National Identity in Shaping Bản Sắc: National identity emerges as a crucial force shaping bản sắc, particularly in Vietnam's postcolonial socialist and collectivist context. For public school teachers, national identity constrains their ability to resist prescribed identities (the typical bản). Meanwhile, for international school teachers, national identity serves as a challenge to dominant Western influences, suggesting that identity formation in such a society cannot be examined without considering national identity dynamics.

Economic Disparities and Power Imbalances: The study highlights socio-economic inequalities within and between two groups of teachers. In public schools, income disparities exist between teachers of high-demand and low-demand subjects, raising concerns about the study-to-test education approach and the prevalence of shadow education. In international schools, income gaps between expatriate and local staff, as well as among local teachers based on their cosmopolitan capital (e.g., English proficiency, internationally recognised qualifications), reflect an imbalance of power between local and global actors in the international schools. When comparing the two sectors, there is also a vast disparity in the earnings of public and international school teachers. This also suggests that these socio-economic hierarchies position local epistemologies as less valuable than West, reinforcing inequalities in the education landscape.

Career Pathways and the Role of Cosmopolitan Capitals: The formation of bản sắc in different education settings has implications on teachers' perceived constraints and benefits, hence their career pathway. As bản sắc continues to evolve through ongoing negotiations in the in-betweenness, teachers can transition between the public and non-public sectors. However, access to such mobility is unequal. Teachers with cosmopolitan capital have the opportunity to choose between sectors, whereas those without such capital are not given such privilege. This highlights how the neoliberal globalised education system reinforces social disparities through the unequal distribution of career opportunities.

This study provides a nuanced understanding of bản sắc within Vietnam's evolving education landscape, demonstrating the intersection of identity, socio-economic structures, and global-local tensions. By highlighting the disparities in and between public and non-public sectors (including international schools), it calls for policy interventions to address economic inequities and ensure more equitable career pathways for teachers. The findings contribute to broader discussions on postcolonial identity formation, the effects of neoliberal globalisation on education, and the socio-economic stratification of teachers in postcolonial countries.

11.3 Suggestion for policy

To address the challenges posed by the two-tiered education labour market, policymakers must consider strategies to level the playing field and promote more equitable career pathways for teachers. Effective interventions should focus on strengthening professional development programs,

recognising local expertise in hiring practices, and ensuring equal compensation and benefits across both sectors. This approach would reduce social disparities and enhance the overall quality of education in Vietnam.

11.3.1 The public sector

If the purpose of reform policies is to align the national education with international standards, policymakers should consider providing opportunities for teachers to develop cosmopolitan capital (e.g., English language training, exposure to international curricula, and study-abroad fellowships) which can help local teachers compete in globalised job markets. Such initiatives would enable public school teachers with more opportunities in their career pathway, compete more effectively in globalised job markets and mitigate disparities between the public and non-public sectors. Implementing structured programs for professional development is therefore essential. Thus, introducing programs for strengthening professional development for public school teachers are essential.

Regarding teachers' working conditions and financial security, the recent introduction of Resolution 29/2024/TT-BGDĐT, which bans private tutoring (shadow education), must be implemented with careful consideration. While this policy aims to regulate education and reduce socio-economic inequalities among teachers of different subjects, it risks removing a critical source of income for public school teachers. However, given teachers' unfamiliarity with administrative procedures, clear guidelines and transitional support should be provided. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) must allow teachers time to adjust to the new resolution and consider alternative financial support mechanisms if shadow education is to be fully phased out.

Moreover, if MOET aims to erase all forms of shadow education, the working conditions, including salaries, of public school teachers must be improved because teacher salaries in Vietnam remain a significant concern. When compared internationally, Vietnamese teachers' salaries are modest. The pay scale for public school teachers on the highest tier is around 10 million VND a month, excluding allowances (see [Chapter 2, subsection 2.5.2](#)), equal to approximately \$5,000 annually. This amount is considerably among the lowest among ASEAN countries (Senate of the Philippines, 2019). The research findings revealed that this pay scale is not commensurate with teachers' workloads, given the overcrowded classrooms and pressure from society. Furthermore, the prevalence of shadow education is deeply rooted in Vietnam's study-to-test culture, which places a heavy burden on students and increases the demand for private tutoring. Without addressing systemic issues such as examination-oriented learning and teacher salaries, banning private tutoring alone will not solve the underlying problems.

Beyond financial concerns, policymakers should also address rigid educational ideologies that restrict teachers' personal beliefs. At the school level, teachers need the flexibility to integrate their

personal beliefs and pedagogical approaches, such as fostering stronger student-teacher relationships and prioritising student well-being. By doing so, it would reduce the tension in teachers' *bản sắc*, between their personal beliefs and the systemic constraints they face, thereby alleviating stress and burnout. The lack of institutional support for teacher well-being in public schools remains a pressing issue. Establishing structured support groups, mental health programs, and professional well-being initiatives would contribute to a healthier and more sustainable teaching environment.

11.3.2 International schools in the non-public sector

In addressing the economic hierarchy, the government should regulate salary disparities between local and expatriate teachers in international schools to prevent economic exploitation and promote equal pay for equal work. While competitive salaries for expatriates may be necessary to attract an international workforce, economic equity for the local population must also be prioritised.

Moreover, international schools should be encouraged (or required) to value local pedagogical knowledge, ensuring that qualified local teachers are not unfairly excluded based on linguistic or cultural biases. Although most international schools could be private establishments, intervention from the MOET to minimise the cultural hierarchies is essential, especially when Decree 86/2018/NĐ-CP emphasises the need to preserve Vietnamese culture, morality, and traditional customs. Further reinforcement of these principles in international schools would help maintain a balance between international integration and national identity preservation.

The perception of Western epistemology as superior within international schools creates barriers for locally educated teachers. To counter this, governments could develop nationally recognised certifications that integrate both local and international teaching standards. This initiative would ensure that teachers educated within Vietnam have equal opportunities to those who obtained their qualifications abroad. By promoting a more inclusive and balanced approach to teacher qualifications, the government can support greater mobility and career advancement for local educators within international schools.

Considering the fact that international school teachers perceive themselves as not representative enough for teachers in Vietnam. Policymakers at national level should also encourage interaction between teachers in the two sectors in order to foster unity among teachers in Vietnam.

The current two-tiered education labour market in Vietnam reflects broader inequalities driven by globalisation and neoliberal educational policies. By implementing targeted reforms, such as professional development programs for public school teachers, fair compensation policies, and more inclusive hiring practices in international schools, policymakers can create a more equitable education system. Addressing these disparities is crucial for fostering social cohesion, ensuring sustainable development, and upholding Vietnam's national identity within an increasingly globalised world.

11.4 Research limitations and suggestions for future studies

The study employs socio-constructivist theories of identity to develop a conceptual framework together with a strong engagement of research participants. Data collection followed a chronological order, with each set building upon the previous to enhance both the depth and validity of the findings. However, to enrich the results, the following research limitations should be acknowledged for consideration in future studies.

First, the study only includes inputs from teachers, some of whom are subject leaders and academic coordinators. Hence, *bản sắc* is only explored from teachers' perception. To gain a more holistic understanding, future studies should incorporate perspectives from other key stakeholders, such as school leaders (e.g., principals and vice-principals), parents, and the general public. These additional viewpoints could offer valuable insights into how teachers' *bản sắc* is perceived by others, thus providing a more nuanced exploration of the concept.

Second, while interviews were conducted with various participants, not all were included in the focus group discussions (FGD). This exclusion was due to practical constraints, including participant availability, the location of the FGD, and limited funding. To address this limitation, future research should aim to conduct FGDs in multiple locations, which would enhance the consistency of the narratives. Moreover, a hybrid approach that combines both online and in-person FGDs could be taken into consideration to allow research participants more flexibility.

Third, focus group participants classified international schools into three main types: Type A international schools – international schools which only offer international curricula (e.g., IB, A-level, GCSE) and are fully foreign-invested; type B – Bilingual international schools offering a combined curriculum with subjects from both international curriculum (e.g., IB, A-level, GCSE) the Vietnam National Curriculum; and type C – international schools which operate both international and bilingual programmes. Although all these schools are foreign-invested, the question of the proportion of foreign investment in type B and type C schools remain unclear. Thus, the foreign investment structure of international schools in Vietnam needs further investigation. Moreover, as all international school teachers in this study work for type B and type C schools, the study doesn't include teachers from Type A schools. This was because this study used snowball data sampling method which relied on participants' network. It was also difficult to identify type A schools by the schools' names and their websites alone. Thus, future studies should include all types of international schools in order to obtain a fuller picture of the international schools in Vietnam.

Fourth, even within the same classification (Type A, B, or C), international schools vary from one another with unique systems, climates, and operational structures. As such, teachers' experiences in these institutions may be both shared and divergent. While the qualitative methods (i.e., one-to-one semi-structure interview, focus group discussion, school observation) provided rich, in-depth insights,

they may not have captured the full range of teacher experiences across different school contexts. Considering this limitation, future studies could include surveys in data collection to facilitate various insights across different international school contexts.

Fifth, despite using postcolonial theory to explore bản sắc, especially at international schools, it is important to note that the observed international schools are not of the former colonising power (e.g., Britain, the United States). This limitation is due to agreements with the school principals. Although Western influences (i.e., English dominance, individualism, cosmopolitan capitals) were evident in the observed school, for a more consistent postcolonial narrative, future research should aim to include American and British international schools.

Sixth, while the interviewees and focus group participants worked in both public primary and secondary schools, observations were limited to a public primary school. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the public education sector, future studies should include observations in public secondary schools, offering a broader perspective on teachers' experiences across different educational levels.

Lastly, as most research participants and observed sites were in the major cities in Vietnam, such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the data does not capture the experiences of teachers in rural contexts, which may differ from those in urban areas. Furthermore, the study predominantly explores the experiences of the Kinh ethnicity, the largest ethnic group in Vietnam. Given that Vietnam is home to 54 ethnic groups, future research should also consider the perspectives of teachers from minority ethnic groups. This would ensure that the voices of locally marginalised groups are heard and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of bản sắc in Vietnam.

11.5 Conclusion marks

During the interview for this PhD programme, I was asked about my motivation to pursue a PhD, I remember saying, “*my intrinsic motivation is to challenge the system we live in*”. I grew up in a strong patriarchal society where women were raised to be obedient, be elegant, be quiet, and most importantly, not to surpass men in education, lest we risk remaining unmarried. This system, ingrained in the social fabric, subtly reinforced the idea that our worth was tied to conforming to traditional roles.

At an early age, I was introduced to Western values through the learning of English, a language that became my bridge to a different worldview. This exposure gave me the courage to question the restrictive system I had been raised in, fostering the belief that I could be greater than the gender norms that had been imposed upon me. As Foucault famously asserts, “*Where there is power, there is resistance*” (Foucault, 1978, p.95). This idea resonated deeply with me, as it mirrored my own resistance to the oppressive structures around me. Later on, I decided to work at international schools where I spoke English and socialised with the expatriates. Gradually, I became acutely aware

of the influences of Western values on my bản sắc, in the way I think, the way I act, the way I speak, the clothes I wear. I recall feeling alienated, often receiving odd looks from society and experiencing internal conflicts and ambiguity about who I truly was. At times, all I could think was, “*I want to escape.*” It was during this period that I decided to pursue a Master’s degree and later a PhD abroad, hoping to distance myself from the societal expectations of my homeland. Ironically, the longer I lived in Western societies, the more I questioned my own identity. The more I reflected, the more I realised how the power structures of the West had shaped not only my worldview but also the broader global narrative.

This internal conflict and its challenge to my bản sắc became the foundation for my thesis. Upon reflection, while I greatly appreciated the professional opportunities abroad, it was the challenges, both personal and intellectual, that truly drove my academic pursuit. The biggest challenge I encountered was the development of the conceptual framework. I struggled with the lack of empirical research from Vietnamese perspectives, compounded by the overwhelming Eurocentric lens that pervades academic discourse. Thus, I spent the first two years of my PhD journey settling on a research concept. While I wanted to explore teachers’ identity, the existing theoretical frameworks spoke a foreign language to me. It was only when my supervisors encouraged me to incorporate Vietnamese language and cultural terms into my framework that I began to feel more aligned with my own research. This process not only deepened my understanding of the topic but also helped me become more confident in drawing from my own lived experiences. Through this journey, I learned that just because something is marginalised doesn’t mean it lacks significance.

Another major challenge was navigating between languages. To maintain authenticity in representing local experiences, I decided to incorporate Vietnamese terms, conduct data collection and analyse them in Vietnamese. This, however, presented a significant challenge when it came to writing the findings, discussions, and making sense of different cultural concepts in English. Furthermore, communicating my research findings to a wider audience in Vietnam was difficult, as many people are not familiar with academic papers written in English. Nonetheless, I learned how to work across these linguistic boundaries, reading and engaging with research, theories, and policies in both languages. This not only enhanced my research skills but also deepened my understanding of how language shapes knowledge production (Young, 2016).

The study has also addressed my role as a former teacher and now a researcher when engaging with my research participants. Not only the teaching skills and experiences in the profession, societal influences, but also critical thinking, understanding of bản sắc and the wider educational landscape were needed from my research participants. After spending an extended period abroad, I was no longer as familiar with the current educational issues in Vietnam, and I had to rely on my research participants to understand the current education system. The time spent abroad had also somewhat diminished my ability to socialise in alignment to Vietnamese norms, making my fieldwork

in my home country a confrontation with my own bản sắc. Nonetheless, I learned how to navigate in my hybridity spectrum, which I think essential for a researcher who works across nations.

Throughout this journey, I constantly questioned my own ability, thinking “*I am not smart enough*”. However, I’ve learned to believe in myself as I witnessed my own professional growth. I remember one of my colleagues from the university saying this thesis is just the beginning of my academic career. This encouragement reinforced my belief in my potential and helped me realise that my journey was only just beginning.

Before concluding, I would like to remind myself and other teachers to embrace who we are, even when there are moments we experience tension, conflicts, and ambiguity within ourselves. This process is natural as our bản sắc constantly negotiate and evolve. More importantly, we shouldn’t stop critically questioning the system locally and globally and how it has shaped our identity nowadays. When looking at the whole education landscape, bản sắc of teachers is easy to overlook regardless of its significance as we are the ones having direct influence on “*những mầm non tổ quốc*” (the future generation). While this study may or may not be generalised to other countries, it contributes to the empowerment of marginalised epistemologies on a global scale and addresses the complexities of identity research in different societal contexts.

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Appendix A1: One-to-one Semi-structured Interview Schedule (English)

Interview Protocol

☐ Before the interview: the Consent form is signed by the participant online and collected by the researcher

- ☐ Explain who I am and what I am doing in the school.
- ☐ Remind the respondent of their rights (Participant Information Sheet)
- ☐ Remind the respondent that the interview will take maximum one hour.
- ☐ Remind the respondent that I am asking them for permission to audio record.

☐ Remind them that their name will not be attached to the data. If the person does not give permission to have an audio recording then I will take notes. If this is refused then the interview cannot go ahead.

- ☐ I will ask the respondent if they have any questions before the interview goes ahead.

Questions:

A . The temporal domain - experiences

1. Past experiences:

- How long have you been teaching?
- Which teacher training institution/ college did you attend? for how long?
- For what reasons did you decide to study in a teachers' college?
- How did you feel about yourself and your teaching career when under pre-service training?

2. Present experiences:

- What role(s) are you taking in the school? what do you think about them?
- How is your experience in the current school as a whole compared to your experiences in other schools? (if this is not the first school you have worked for)
- How do you feel about yourself and your teaching career now?
- Would you please tell me what changes, i.e. feelings and ideas about being a teacher and understanding of yourself, you experienced? Would you walk me through the process, from your childhood to the present?

3. Imagined future experiences/ future expectation

- What did you expect for yourself and your teaching career when under pre-service training? To what extent does your expectation (in the past) met and not met?

- What is the future goal for yourself and your teaching career? And how are they being achieved?

B. The social domain

1. Communication and relationship with students

- How would you describe your relationship with your students inside the classroom? Could you elaborate on your answer?
- How would you describe your relationship with your students outside of the classroom? Could you elaborate on your answer?
- How do you communicate with your students inside and outside in the classroom? could you give me some example?
- How do you feel about the communication process?

2. Communication and relationship with other teachers

- How would you describe your relationship with other teachers in the school? Could you elaborate on your answer?
- How do you communicate with other teachers in the schools? How do you feel about the communication process?

3. Communication and relationship with school leaders

- How would you describe your relationship with school leaders (i.e, head of the department, vice-principal, principal)? Could you elaborate on your answer?
- How do you communicate with with school leaders (i.e, head of the department, vice-principal, principal)? How do you feel about the communication process?

4. Communication and relationship with students' parents

- How would you describe your relationship with your students' parents? Could you elaborate on your answer?
- How do you communicate with your students' parents? How do you feel about the communication process?

5. Communication and relationship in the professional community

- How do you perceive your engagement in the professional teaching community? (i.e, do you communicate with teachers who are not from your school?; do you feel

supported in the professional teaching community?, do you feel a sense of belonging in the professional teaching community in Vietnam?)

C. The spatial domain

- How do you perceive the Vietnamese culture, norms, and values in general and regarding teaching?
- In your view, what expectation does Vietnamese society impose on teachers? and to what extent?
- As a teacher in Vietnamese society, what are your own conception (own beliefs and values) of being a teacher?
- Do you think your conception matches the society's view of being a teacher? Could you elaborate on your answer? Why or why not?

Anything else you would like to say?

Appendix A2: One-to-one Semi-structured Interview Schedule (Vietnamese)

A. Kinh nghiệm và trải nghiệm

1. Kinh nghiệm và trải nghiệm trong quá khứ

- Thầy/ Cô làm giáo viên bao lâu rồi?
- Thầy/ Cô đã theo học trường/cơ sở đào tạo giáo viên nào? trong bao lâu?
- Vì lý do gì Thầy/ Cô quyết định học sư phạm?
- Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về bản thân và sự nghiệp giảng dạy của mình khi còn là sinh viên sư phạm?

2. Kinh nghiệm và trải nghiệm hiện tại

- Thầy/ Cô đang đảm nhận (những) vai trò nào trong trường? Thầy/ Cô có suy nghĩ gì những vai trò mình đang đảm nhận?
- Trải nghiệm của Thầy/ Cô ở ngôi trường hiện tại nhìn chung như thế nào so với trải nghiệm của Thầy/ Cô ở các trường khác? (nếu có)
- Hiện tại Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về bản thân cũng như nghề dạy học của mình?
- Thầy/ Cô có thể cho tôi bản thân đã trải qua những thay đổi nào không? Ví dụ như những cảm xúc và suy nghĩ về việc làm giáo viên cũng như cách nhìn nhận về bản thân mình? Thầy/ Cô có thể dẫn tôi đi qua quá trình thay đổi này, từ thời thơ ấu của Thầy/ Cô đến hiện tại được không?

3. Kỳ vọng trong tương lai

- Thầy/ Cô mong đợi điều gì cho bản thân và sự nghiệp giảng dạy của mình khi còn là sinh viên sư phạm? Những kỳ vọng đó đã được đáp ứng và chưa được đáp ứng ở mức độ nào?
- Mục tiêu tương lai cho bản thân và sự nghiệp giảng dạy của Thầy/ Cô là gì? Và những mục tiêu đó đang được hoàn thành nào?

B. Tương tác xã hội

1. Sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ với học sinh

- Thầy/ Cô mô tả mối quan hệ của mình với học sinh trong lớp học như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm cho câu trả lời của mình không?
- Thầy/ Cô mô tả mối quan hệ của mình với học sinh bên ngoài lớp học như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm cho câu trả lời của mình không?

- Thầy/ Cô giao tiếp với học sinh trong và ngoài lớp học như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô có thể cho tôi một số ví dụ được không?
- Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về quá trình giao tiếp với học sinh?

2. Sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ với giáo viên đồng nghiệp

- Thầy/ Cô mô tả mối quan hệ của Thầy/ Cô với các giáo viên khác trong trường như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm cho câu trả lời của mình không?
- Thầy/ Cô giao tiếp với các giáo viên khác trong trường như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về quá trình giao tiếp với các giáo viên đồng nghiệp?

3. Sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ với Thầy/ Cô lãnh đạo nhà trường

- Thầy/ Cô mô tả mối quan hệ của mình với các lãnh đạo nhà trường như thế nào (ví dụ với trưởng bộ môn, phó hiệu trưởng, hiệu trưởng)? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm cho câu trả lời của mình không?
- Thầy/ Cô giao tiếp với các lãnh đạo nhà trường như thế nào (ví dụ với trưởng phòng, phó hiệu trưởng, hiệu trưởng)? Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về quá trình giao tiếp đó?

4. Sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ với phụ huynh học sinh

- Thầy/ Cô mô tả mối quan hệ của mình với các phụ huynh học sinh? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm cho câu trả lời của mình không?
- Thầy/ Cô giao tiếp với các phụ huynh học sinh như thế nào? Thầy/ Cô cảm thấy thế nào về quá trình giao tiếp đó?

5. Sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ với cộng đồng sư phạm

- Thầy/ Cô có cảm nhận thế nào về sự gắn kết của mình với cộng đồng sư phạm? (ví dụ như Thầy/ Cô có kết nối với những giáo viên không cùng trường với mình không?; Thầy/ Cô có cảm thấy được hỗ trợ trong cộng đồng giảng dạy chuyên nghiệp không?; Thầy/ Cô có cảm thấy mình là một phần của cộng đồng sư phạm Việt Nam không?)

C. Vị thế xã hội

- Thầy/ Cô cảm nhận thế nào về văn hóa, chuẩn mực và giá trị của Việt Nam nói chung đối với nghề sư phạm nói riêng?
- Theo Thầy/ Cô, xã hội Việt Nam đặt ra những kỳ vọng gì đối với giáo viên? và ở mức độ nào?

- Là một nhà giáo trong xã hội Việt Nam, quan niệm (niềm tin và giá trị riêng) của Thầy/ Cô về nghề giáo là gì?
- Thầy/ Cô có nghĩ quan niệm của mình tương thích với quan điểm của xã hội về nghề giáo không? Thầy/ Cô có thể giải thích thêm về câu trả lời của mình không? Tại sao hoặc tại sao không?

Thầy/ Cô có muốn bổ sung gì thêm không?

Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Schedule – For Researcher (English)

Focus group discussion protocol

- ☐ Explain who I am and what I am doing in the school.
- ☐ Remind the participants of their rights (Participant Information Sheet) and collect the

Consent form

☐ Remind the participants that the discussion will take maximum 90 minutes including a break.

☐ Remind the participants that I am asking them for permission to video and audio record.

☐ Remind the participants that their name will not be attached to the data. If one person does not give permission to have an video and audio recording then I will take notes. If this is refused then the discussion cannot go ahead.

☐ I will ask the participants if they have any questions before the discussion goes ahead.

Themes:

A. Definition of bản sắc

B. Exploring three domains:

The temporal domain – time: participants fill in keywords, discussion is followed

The social domain – the work environment: participants fill in keywords, discussion is followed

The spatial domain – Vietnamese society: participants fill in keywords, discussion is followed

Discussion on the intertwining domains and most prominent domain.

C. The role of language: checking findings from one-to-one interview: International school teachers had a tendency to speak more English during the interview

D. The connection between the work environment and the society: checking findings from one-to-one interview: International schools have tenuous connection with the wider Vietnamese society

E. Discussion on the “self”

F. Participants’ last thoughts

Appendix C: Participant's Handout

Project title	Explore Teachers' Bản sắc (identity) in the Context of Education Reform: A Comparative Study
Date and Time	August 23rd 2024 17.00-18.00 (GMT+7)
Method	Focus group discussion

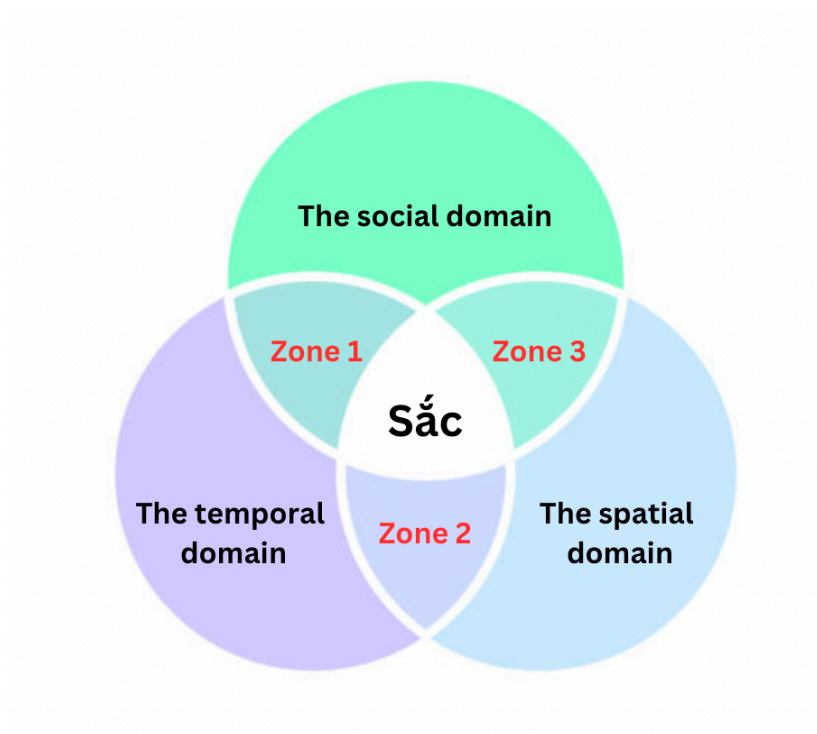
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION CONTENT

1. Could you define 'bản sắc' according to your understanding?

(Dựa vào kiến thức và kinh nghiệm của bản thân, quý thầy/cô hãy định nghĩa 'bản sắc')

2. Could you fill in this conceptual framework with your own keywords

(Dùng vốn từ của bản thân, quý thầy/cô hãy điền vào khung khái niệm bên dưới)

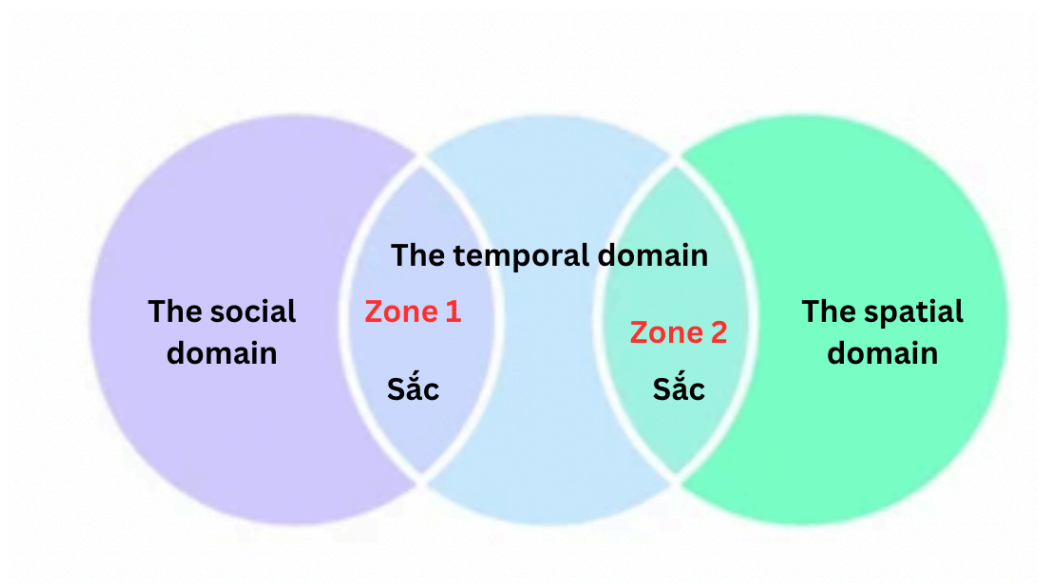


Additional question: In which domain do you think teachers' bản sắc is the most prominent?

(Theo quý thầy/cô, dựa vào khung khái niệm này, bản sắc của giáo viên được thể hiện rõ nhất trong vùng/ miền nào?)

3. One research finding shows that international school teachers' social and spatial domains don't intertwine, could you give your opinions and the rationales behind them?

(Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy bản sắc của giáo viên trường quốc tế không có sự giao thoa giữa vùng môi trường làm việc (social) và vùng xã hội (spatial), quý thầy/ cô có suy nghĩ gì về phát hiện này?)



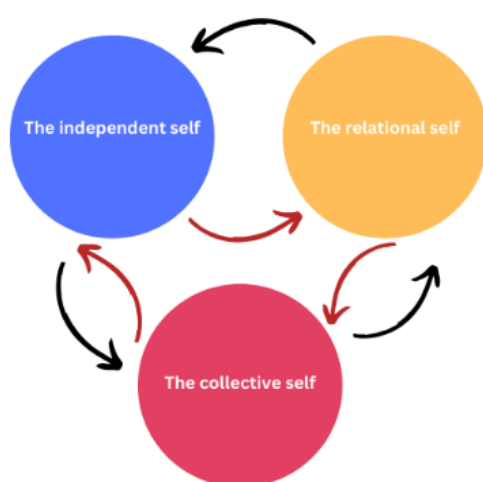
4. Below is the frequency of English usage by public school teachers and international school teachers during the research interviews, could you give your opinions and the rationales behind them?

(Dưới đây là thống kê tần suất sử dụng tiếng Anh của giáo viên trường công lập và giáo viên trường quốc tế, thầy/cô có suy nghĩ gì về điều này?)

	International school teachers	Public school teachers
The frequency of English used (số lần sử dụng tiếng Anh)	261	88

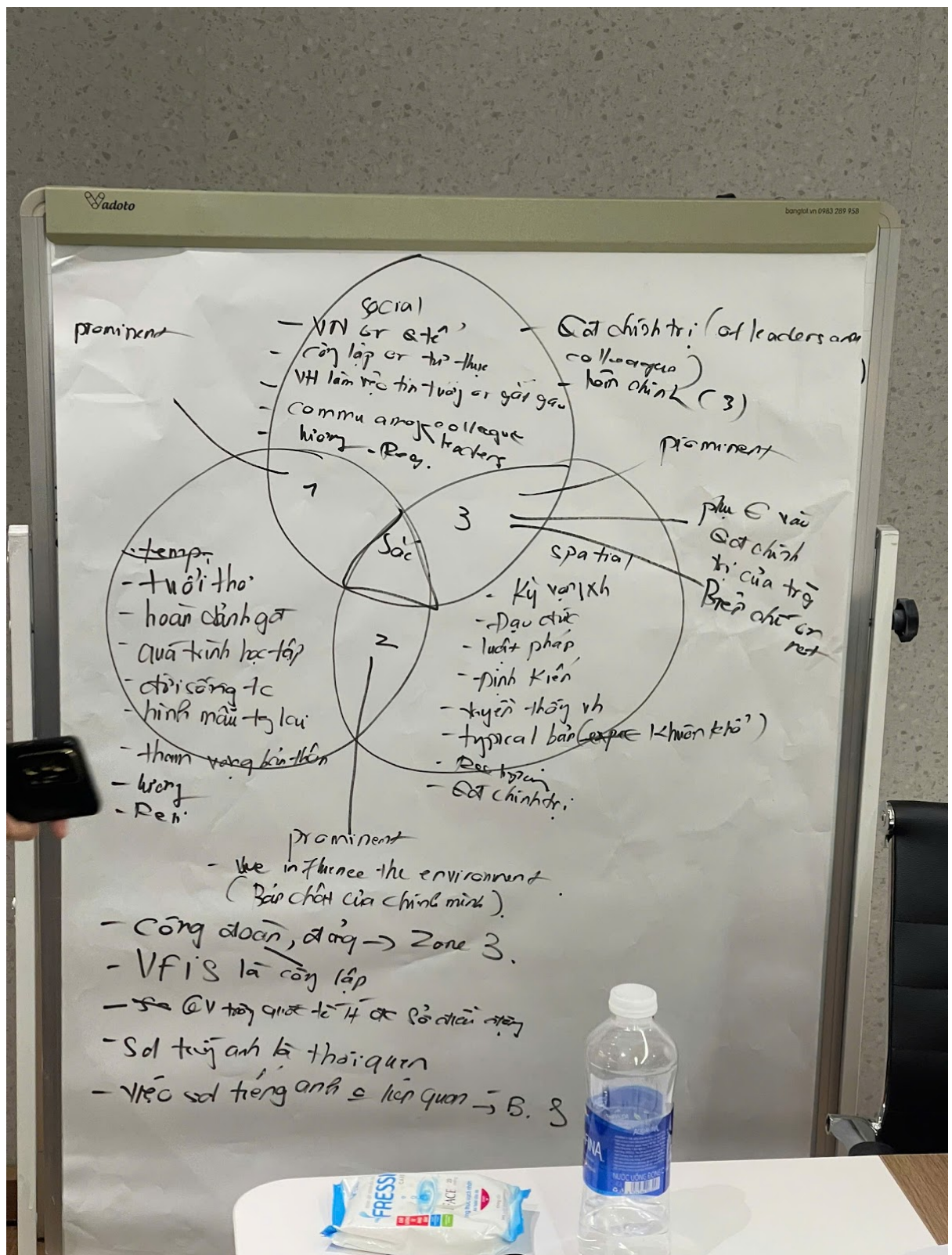
5. The figure below emerges from the research findings, these three types of self-presentation co-exist in teachers and are inter-relational. Do you experience harmony or conflicts in these self-presentations? Could you justify your answers?

(Biểu đồ tư duy dưới đây là một trong những kết quả nghiên cứu, ba loại hình ‘bản thân’ cùng tồn tại trong giáo viên và tác động lên nhau. Quý thầy/cô có từng trải qua sự mâu thuẫn hay hòa hợp nào trong ba loại hình ‘bản thân’ không? Quý thầy/cô hãy giải thích cho câu trả lời của mình)



6. Final comments (Quý thầy/cô có muốn bổ sung thêm gì nữa không?)

Appendix D: Participants' Conceptualisation of Bản Sắc During Focus Group Discussion



(Rộng)

B.S: Đặc điểm riêng nhận biết (cá tính)

1 yếu tố để vẽ cái j đó (cá nhân $\in$ B.S. cơ thể)

Bản chất

màu sắc (individual)

Kinh nghiệm

multi-layer

tính cách

trải nghiệm

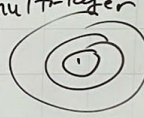
cổ+lõi

Đẹp đẽ

B.S $\subseteq$ giống nhau

unchanged
(collective)

changeable



B.S.G.V - G.V là hình mẫu, chuẩn mực

Expect (xh) $\rightarrow$ Nuôi dưỡng, thăng cấp vs nghệ + XT: từ chất

- $\varnothing$ phải q.v nào cũng giống nhau

- B.S có thể $\varnothing$ phù hợp vs nghệ

Appendix E1: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form for One-To-One Interviews (English)

SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Information Sheet for individual interviews

Dear teacher,

I am a PhD researcher from the Department of Education, Maynooth University, Ireland. As part of the requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Maija Salokangas and Dr. Anthony Malone. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study exploring ‘Vietnamese teachers’ bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform’.

Purpose of the Study.

The study is particularly interested in teachers’ perception of bản sắc. The focus of the study will be on teachers’ past and current experiences in schools and in Vietnamese society.

What will participating in the study involve?

The study will involve one-on-one online interviews with teachers, a discussion within a group of teachers, and a school visit of the researchers. You are invited to participate in individual interviews. The interview will be conducted via Teams or Zoom online and will be video and audio recorded. The interview will last between 45 minutes to an hour. The interview will be conducted in Vietnamese and transcribed before being translated into English.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because you are a Vietnamese teacher with valuable teaching experience which makes you an ideal participant for this research.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your time to participate in an interview. It is entirely up to you to decide whether you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason until 01/01/2024. You may do that by emailing Jessie.du@mu.ie. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

You are asked to participate in an online individual interview which will last a maximum of 60 minutes. The individual interviews are conducted to cast light on different aspects of teachers' bản sắc such as the past and current teaching experiences; your communication and relationship with other teachers, the school leaders, students, and parents; and your status as a teacher in the Vietnamese society. The interview will focus on the following areas of teachers' bản sắc:

1. Experiences: your pre-service teacher training experiences, experiences in your previous and current schools, your future goals as a teacher.
2. Social interactions: your communication and relationships with other teachers, school leaders, students, and parents inside and outside the school.
3. Societal status: your own personal beliefs and values, your views on Vietnamese culture and values in general, your views on what Vietnamese society expects from teachers, and your views on how Vietnamese society sees teachers.

Due to your role as the teacher, I would warmly welcome any insight you might be able to share on educational and social issues that you see as significant.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No true names will be identified at any time in our data analysis, pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in our write-up in order to discuss the data efficiently. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by me - Ngoc Thao Du

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion. I am asked to communicate the following to any research participants:

‘It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, the confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.’

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be stored in such a way, at MU, that it will not be possible to identify you, or your school. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. All data will be destroyed after ten years by Ngoc Thao Du. Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by Ngoc Thao Du in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up in my doctoral thesis and published in academic peer-reviewed journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request by emailing jessie.du@mu.ie

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

It will take some of your valuable time.

What if there is a problem? Please do get in touch with me if any issues arise (Jessie.du@mu.ie)

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, please contact me: Jessie.du@mu.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form for individual teacher interviews

I.....agree to participate in the research study by Ngoc Thao Du titled: Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interviews with Ngoc Thao Du to be recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up until 01/01/2024. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.
☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet. ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed..... Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

Appendix E2: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form for Teacher One-To-One Interviews (Vietnamese)

BIỂU MẪU SRESC

PHIẾU CUNG CẤP THÔNG TIN VÀ CHẤP THUẬN THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Kính gửi quý Thầy/ Cô,

Tôi là nghiên cứu sinh đến từ khoa Giáo Dục, trường đại học Maynooth, Ireland. Công trình nghiên cứu là 1 phần của luận án tiến sĩ Giáo Dục, dưới sự hướng dẫn và giám sát của TS. Maija Salokangas và TS. Anthony Malone. Tôi viết thư này nhằm mục đích trân trọng mời Thầy/ Cô tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu mang tên ‘Khám phá bản sắc của giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục’.

Mục đích nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm khai thác suy nghĩ và nhận thức của giáo viên về bản sắc của chính mình. Nội dung công trình nghiên cứu sẽ chú trọng vào trải nghiệm và kinh nghiệm giảng dạy của giáo viên khi làm việc trong nhà trường và trong xã hội Việt Nam.

Nội dung tham gia nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này bao gồm phỏng vấn online 1-1 với giáo viên, thảo luận nhóm giữa các giáo viên, và chuyến đi thực địa đến nhà trường. Thông qua thư này, tôi trân trọng kính mời quý Thầy/ Cô tham gia vào buổi phỏng vấn online qua Teams hoặc Zoom. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ kéo dài từ 45 đến 60 phút. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ được tiến hành bằng tiếng Việt, sau đó sẽ được chuyển biên và dịch thuật sang tiếng Anh.

Đơn vị chấp thuận nghiên cứu

Đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu đã được xét duyệt và chấp thuận bởi hội đồng Đạo Đức nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Nếu có nhu cầu, phiếu chấp thuận đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi đến quý Thầy/ Cô.

Lý do tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô hiện đang là giáo viên Việt Nam với những kinh nghiệm giảng dạy phong phú, điều này góp phần làm quý Thầy/ Cô trở thành đối tượng lý tưởng cho công trình nghiên cứu này.

Chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô không bắt buộc phải tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu này. Tuy nhiên tôi hi vọng quý Thầy/ Cô sẽ bỏ chút thời gian quý báu để tham gia vào buổi phỏng vấn online. Nếu quyết định tham gia, Thầy/ Cô sẽ cần ký vào phiếu Chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu. Quý Thầy/ Cô hoàn toàn có thể rút lui cho đến trước ngày 01/01/2024 bằng cách gửi thư đến địa chỉ email Jessie.du@mu.ie. Quyết định tham gia hay rút lui hoàn toàn sẽ không ảnh hưởng đến mối quan hệ giữa Thầy/ Cô và nghiên cứu sinh cũng như với trường đại học Maynooth.

Nội dung phỏng vấn

Buổi phỏng vấn online 1-1 sẽ kéo dài tối đa 60 phút nhằm để khám phá những khía cạnh khác nhau trong bản sắc của giáo viên, bao gồm kinh nghiệm giảng dạy và làm việc; giao tiếp và mối quan hệ của giáo viên với đồng nghiệp, lãnh đạo trường, học sinh, và phụ huynh; và vị thế của giáo viên trong xã hội Việt Nam. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ xoay quanh những nội dung chính như sau:

1. Kinh nghiệm và trải nghiệm: trải nghiệm đào tạo sư phạm trước khi trở thành giáo viên, trải nghiệm và kinh nghiệm làm việc trong quá khứ và hiện tại, mục tiêu tương lai trong nghề.
2. Tương tác xã hội: giao tiếp và mối quan hệ của giáo viên với các đồng nghiệp, lãnh đạo nhà trường, học sinh, và phụ huynh trong và ngoài nhà trường.
3. Vị thế xã hội: quan điểm và giá trị sống cá nhân của chính bản thân giáo viên, góc nhìn của giáo viên về xã hội Việt Nam nói chung, góc nhìn của giáo viên về những kỳ vọng hoặc áp đặt của xã hội Việt Nam lên giáo viên, và góc nhìn của giáo viên về cách xã hội Việt Nam nhìn nhận nghề giáo.

Với tư cách là một người giáo viên, mọi quan điểm của quý Thầy/ Cô về bất kỳ vấn đề giáo dục hoặc vấn đề xã hội ở Việt Nam đều được nhiệt thành trân trọng.

Bảo mật khi tham gia nghiên cứu

Mọi thông tin quý Thầy/ Cô cung cấp trong quá trình nghiên cứu đều được cẩn trọng bảo mật. Tất cả những tên riêng (họ tên cá nhân) sẽ không được tiết lộ. Thay vào đó, mật danh sẽ được sử dụng khi phân tích và xuất bản dữ liệu. Tất cả các bản in giấy (nếu có) sẽ được bảo quản trong ngăn kéo được khóa kín trong phòng nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Tất cả mọi văn bản điện tử mã hóa và lưu trữ bảo đảm trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth và chỉ được truy cập bởi tôi - nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo.

Tất cả mọi thông tin đều sẽ không được cung cấp cho bất kỳ tổ chức hoặc cá nhân thứ ba nào. Nếu có nhu cầu, quý Thầy/ Cô sẽ được cung cấp những thông tin thu thập được trong buổi phỏng vấn. Với tư cách là một nhà nghiên cứu, tôi được yêu cầu truyền đạt những điều sau đây tới quý Thầy/ Cô:

‘Trong một vài trường hợp, tính bảo mật của nghiên cứu và tính bảo mật của dữ liệu và hồ sơ nghiên cứu có thể bị tòa án hủy bỏ trong trường hợp kiện tụng hoặc trong quá trình điều tra của cơ quan pháp lý. Trong những trường hợp như vậy, Nhà trường sẽ thực hiện tất cả các bước thích hợp theo luật để đảm bảo rằng tính bảo mật được duy trì ở mức độ lớn nhất có thể.’

Lưu trữ thông tin dữ liệu

Khi dữ liệu được lưu trữ ở trường đại học Maynooth, mọi thông tin cá nhân về Thầy/ Cô hoặc nhà trường nơi Thầy/ Cô công tác sẽ được bảo mật. Sau khi hoàn thành công trình nghiên cứu, thông tin dữ liệu sẽ được lưu lại trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth.

Tất cả mọi thông tin dữ liệu sẽ bị hủy sau 10 năm do chính nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo. Dữ liệu thủ công (bản in giấy) sẽ được phân nhỏ một cách bảo mật và dữ liệu điện tử sẽ được định dạng lại hoặc ghi đè bởi Du Ngọc Thảo, trường đại học Maynooth.

Kết quả nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này sẽ được viết thành luận án tiến sĩ của tôi và được xuất bản trên các tạp chí khoa học được bình duyệt. Nếu có nhu cầu, bản sao của kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được cung cấp cho quý Thầy/ Cô bằng cách gửi thư về địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Bắt cập của việc tham gia nghiên cứu

Việc tham gia nghiên cứu sẽ làm mất một ít thời gian quý báu của quý Thầy/ Cô.

Trong trường hợp có vấn đề phát sinh, Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu có thắc mắc thêm, Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu đồng ý tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu, xin quý Thầy/ Cô vui lòng điền và ký tên vào phiếu chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu.

Chân thành cảm ơn quý Thầy/ Cô đã dành thời gian để đọc thư này.

Phiếu chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu

Tôi chấp thuận tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu bởi Du Ngọc Thảo mang tên: Nghiên cứu so sánh - Khám phá bản sắc của giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục.

Xin vui lòng đánh dấu vào mỗi câu dưới đây:

Mục đích và bản chất của nghiên cứu đã được giải thích cho tôi thông qua văn bản. Tôi đã có thể đặt câu hỏi và được trả lời thỏa đáng. ☐

Tôi tham gia một cách tự nguyện. ☐

Tôi cho phép ghi âm cuộc phỏng vấn của tôi với Du Ngọc Thảo. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu mà không bị ảnh hưởng bất cứ lúc nào, cho dù đó là trước khi bắt đầu hay trong khi tôi đang tham gia. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng tôi có thể rút lại quyền sử dụng dữ liệu cho đến ngày 01/01/2024. ☐

Tôi đã được giải thích về cách quản lý dữ liệu và tôi có thể truy cập dữ liệu đó nếu yêu cầu. ☐

Tôi hiểu các giới hạn bảo mật như được mô tả trong phiếu thông tin. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng dữ liệu của tôi, ở định dạng ẩn danh, có thể được sử dụng trong các dự án nghiên cứu sâu hơn và bất kỳ ấn phẩm nào tiếp theo nếu tôi cho phép như dưới đây: ☐

Tôi đồng ý dữ liệu của mình được sử dụng cho các dự án nghiên cứu tiếp theo ☐

Tôi không đồng ý dữ liệu của mình được sử dụng cho các dự án nghiên cứu tiếp theo ☐

Chữ ký Ngày tháng năm

Tên người tham gia viết hoa

Appendix F1: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form for Teacher Focus Group Discussion (English)

SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Dear teacher,

I am a PhD researcher from the Department of Education, Maynooth University, Ireland. As part of the requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Maija Salokangas and Dr. Anthony Malone. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study exploring ‘Vietnamese teacher’s bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform’.

Purpose of the Study

The study is particularly interested in teachers’ perception of bản sắc. The focus of the study will be on teachers’ past and current experiences in schools and in Vietnamese society.

What will participating in the study involve?

The study will involve one-on-one online interviews with teachers, a discussion within a group of teachers, and a school visit of the researchers. You are invited to participate in teacher focus group discussion with other teachers. The focus group discussion will be conducted in person at a rented private space in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The discussion will last for an hour to 1.5 hour (including a coffee break) and will be video and audio recorded. The discussion will be conducted in Vietnamese and transcribed before being translated into English.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because you are a Vietnamese teacher with valuable teaching experience which makes you an ideal participant for this research.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your time to participate in the discussion. It is entirely up to you to decide whether you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to

take part, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason until 01/09/2024. You may do that by emailing Jessie.du@mu.ie. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

You are asked to participate in a group discussion with other teachers which will last a maximum of 90 minutes (including coffee break). The group discussion are conducted so that teachers can share their input in the research initial findings. The themes of the discussion will focus on teachers' past and current teaching experiences; teachers' communication and relationship with other teachers, the school leaders, students, and parents; and teachers' status in the Vietnamese society as a group. The following areas will be covered:

1. Experiences: your thoughts on teachers' training experiences, collective experiences of teachers in their previous and current schools, and teachers' future professional goals
2. Social interactions: your thoughts on the relationships and communication teachers have with other teachers, school leaders, students, and parents inside and outside the school
3. Societal status: your thoughts on teachers' beliefs and values, your views on Vietnamese culture and values in general, your views on what Vietnamese society expects from teachers, and your views on how Vietnamese society sees teachers.

Due to your role as the teacher, I would warmly welcome any insight you might be able to share on educational and social issues that you see as significant.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No true names will be identified at any time in our data analysis, pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in our write-up in order to discuss the data efficiently. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by me - Ngoc Thao Du

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion. I am asked to communicate the following to any research participants:

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, the confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be stored in such a way, at MU, that it will not be possible to identify you, or your school. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. All data will be destroyed after ten years by Ngoc Thao Du. Manual data will be

shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by Ngoc Thao Du in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up in my doctoral thesis and published in academic peer-reviewed journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request by emailing jessie.du@mu.ie

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

It will take some of your valuable time.

What if there is a problem? Please do get in touch with me if any issues arise (Jessie.du@mu.ie)

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, please contact me: Jessie.du@mu.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form for teacher focus group discussion

I.....agree to participate in the research study by Ngoc Thao Du titled: Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my participation in group discussion organised by Ngoc Thao Du to be recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up until 01/09/2024. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet. ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed..... Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

Appendix F2: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form for Teacher Focus Group Discussion (Vietnamese)

BIỂU MẪU SRESC

PHIẾU CUNG CẤP THÔNG TIN VÀ CHẤP THUẬN THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Kính gửi quý Thầy/ Cô,

Tôi là nghiên cứu sinh đến từ khoa Giáo Dục, trường đại học Maynooth, Ireland. Công trình nghiên cứu là 1 phần của luận án tiến sĩ Giáo Dục, dưới sự hướng dẫn và giám sát của TS. Maija Salokangas và TS. Anthony Malone. Tôi viết thư này nhằm mục đích trân trọng mời Thầy/ Cô tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu mang tên ‘Khám phá bản sắc của giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục’.

Mục đích nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm khai thác suy nghĩ và nhận thức của giáo viên về bản sắc của chính mình. Nội dung công trình nghiên cứu sẽ chú trọng vào trải nghiệm và kinh nghiệm giảng dạy của giáo viên khi làm việc trong nhà trường và trong xã hội Việt Nam.

Nội dung tham gia nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này bao gồm phỏng vấn online 1-1 với giáo viên, thảo luận nhóm giữa các giáo viên, và chuyến đi thực địa đến nhà trường. Thông qua thư này, tôi trân trọng kính mời quý Thầy/ Cô tham gia vào buổi thảo luận nhóm giữa các giáo viên. Cuộc thảo luận nhóm sẽ được tiến hành trực tiếp tại một không gian riêng tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam. Cuộc thảo luận sẽ kéo dài từ 60 đến 90 phút (bao gồm cả thời gian nghỉ giải lao) và sẽ được ghi hình và ghi âm. Buổi thảo luận sẽ được tiến hành bằng tiếng Việt, sau đó sẽ được chuyển biên và dịch thuật sang tiếng Anh.

Đơn vị chấp thuận nghiên cứu

Đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu đã được xét duyệt và chấp thuận bởi hội đồng Đạo Đức nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Nếu có nhu cầu, phiếu chấp thuận đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi đến quý Thầy/ Cô.

Lý do tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô hiện đang là giáo viên Việt Nam với những kinh nghiệm giảng dạy phong phú, điều này góp phần làm quý Thầy/ Cô trở thành đối tượng lý tưởng cho công trình nghiên cứu này.

Chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô không bắt buộc phải tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu này. Tuy nhiên tôi hi vọng quý Thầy/ Cô sẽ bỏ chút thời gian quý báu để tham gia vào buổi thảo luận nhóm. Nếu quyết định tham gia, Thầy/ Cô sẽ cần ký vào phiếu Chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu. Quý Thầy/ Cô hoàn toàn có thể rút lui cho đến trước ngày 01/09/2024 bằng cách gửi thư đến địa chỉ email Jessie.du@mu.ie. Quyết định tham gia hay rút lui hoàn toàn sẽ không ảnh hưởng đến mối quan hệ giữa Thầy/ Cô và nghiên cứu sinh cũng như với trường đại học Maynooth.

Nội dung cuộc thảo luận nhóm

Buổi thảo luận nhóm giữa các giáo viên sẽ kéo dài tối đa 90 phút (bao gồm thời gian nghỉ giữa giờ). Thảo luận nhóm được tiến hành để các Thầy/ Cô có thể chia sẻ ý kiến đóng góp của mình về những phát hiện ban đầu của nghiên cứu. Chủ đề của cuộc thảo luận sẽ bao gồm kinh nghiệm giảng dạy và làm việc của giáo viên; giao tiếp và mối quan hệ của giáo viên với đồng nghiệp, lãnh đạo trường, học sinh, và phụ huynh; và vị thế của giáo viên trong xã hội Việt Nam. Buổi thảo luận nhóm sẽ xoay quanh những nội dung chính như sau:

Kinh nghiệm và trải nghiệm: suy nghĩ của Thầy/ Cô về trải nghiệm đào tạo sư phạm trước khi trở thành giáo viên, trải nghiệm và kinh nghiệm làm việc trong quá khứ và hiện tại, mục tiêu tương lai trong nghề.

Tương tác xã hội: suy nghĩ của Thầy/ Cô về việc giao tiếp và mối quan hệ của giáo viên với các đồng nghiệp, lãnh đạo nhà trường, học sinh, và phụ huynh trong và ngoài nhà trường.

Vị thế xã hội: suy nghĩ của Thầy/ Cô về quan điểm và giá trị sống của giáo viên, góc nhìn của giáo viên về xã hội Việt Nam nói chung, góc nhìn của giáo viên về những kỳ vọng hoặc áp đặt của xã hội Việt Nam lên giáo viên, và góc nhìn của giáo viên về cách xã hội Việt Nam nhìn nhận nghề giáo.

Với tư cách là một người giáo viên, mọi quan điểm của quý Thầy/ Cô về bất kỳ vấn đề giáo dục hoặc vấn đề xã hội ở Việt Nam đều được nhiệt thành trân trọng.

Bảo mật khi tham gia nghiên cứu

Mọi thông tin quý Thầy/ Cô cung cấp trong quá trình nghiên cứu đều được cẩn trọng bảo mật. Tất cả những tên riêng (họ tên cá nhân) sẽ không được tiết lộ. Thay vào đó, mật danh sẽ được sử dụng khi phân tích và xuất bản dữ liệu. Tất cả các bản in giấy (nếu có) sẽ được bảo quản trong ngăn kéo được khóa kín trong phòng nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Tất cả mọi văn bản điện tử mã hóa và lưu trữ bảo đảm trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth và chỉ được truy cập bởi tôi - nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo.

Tất cả mọi thông tin đều sẽ không được cung cấp cho bất kỳ tổ chức hoặc cá nhân thứ ba nào. Nếu có nhu cầu, quý Thầy/ Cô sẽ được cung cấp những thông tin thu thập được trong buổi thảo luận. Với tư cách là một nhà nghiên cứu, tôi được yêu cầu truyền đạt những điều sau đây tới quý Thầy/ Cô:

‘Trong một vài trường hợp, tính bảo mật của nghiên cứu và tính bảo mật của dữ liệu và hồ sơ nghiên cứu có thể bị tòa án hủy bỏ trong trường hợp kiện tụng hoặc trong quá trình điều tra của cơ quan pháp lý. Trong những trường hợp như vậy, Nhà trường sẽ thực hiện tất cả các bước thích hợp theo luật để đảm bảo rằng tính bảo mật được duy trì ở mức độ lớn nhất có thể.’

Lưu trữ thông tin dữ liệu

Khi dữ liệu được lưu trữ ở trường đại học Maynooth, mọi thông tin cá nhân về Thầy/ Cô hoặc nhà trường nơi Thầy/ Cô công tác sẽ được bảo mật. Sau khi hoàn thành công trình nghiên cứu, thông tin dữ liệu sẽ được lưu lại trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth.

Tất cả mọi thông tin dữ liệu sẽ bị hủy sau 10 năm do chính nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo. Dữ liệu thủ công (bản in giấy) sẽ được phân nhỏ một cách bảo mật và dữ liệu điện tử sẽ được định dạng lại hoặc ghi đè bởi Du Ngọc Thảo, trường đại học Maynooth.

Kết quả nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này sẽ được viết thành luận án tiến sĩ của tôi và được xuất bản trên các tạp chí khoa học được bình duyệt. Nếu có nhu cầu, bản sao của kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được cung cấp cho quý Thầy/ Cô bằng cách gửi thư về địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Bắt cập của việc tham gia nghiên cứu

Việc tham gia nghiên cứu sẽ làm mất một ít thời gian quý báu của quý Thầy/ Cô.

Trong trường hợp có vấn đề phát sinh, Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu có thắc mắc thêm, Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu đồng ý tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu, xin quý Thầy/ Cô vui lòng điền và ký tên vào phiếu chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu.

Chân thành cảm ơn quý Thầy/ Cô đã dành thời gian để đọc thư này.

Phiếu Chấp Thuận Tham Gia Nghiên Cứu

Tôi chấp thuận tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu bởi Du Ngọc Thảo mang tên: Nghiên cứu so sánh - Khám phá bản sắc của giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục.

Xin vui lòng đánh dấu vào mỗi câu dưới đây:

Mục đích và bản chất của nghiên cứu đã được giải thích cho tôi thông qua văn bản. Tôi đã có thể đặt câu hỏi và được trả lời thỏa đáng. ☐

Tôi tham gia một cách tự nguyện. ☐

Tôi cho phép cuộc thảo luận nhóm dẫn dắt bởi Du Ngọc Thảo được ghi hình và ghi âm. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu mà không bị ảnh hưởng bất cứ lúc nào, cho dù đó là trước khi bắt đầu hay trong khi tôi đang tham gia. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng tôi có thể rút lại quyền sử dụng dữ liệu cho đến ngày 01/01/2024. ☐

Tôi đã được giải thích về cách quản lý dữ liệu và tôi có thể truy cập dữ liệu đó nếu yêu cầu. ☐

Tôi hiểu các giới hạn bảo mật như được mô tả trong phiếu thông tin. ☐

Tôi hiểu rằng dữ liệu của tôi, ở định dạng ẩn danh, có thể được sử dụng trong các dự án nghiên cứu sâu hơn và bất kỳ ấn phẩm nào tiếp theo nếu tôi cho phép như dưới đây: ☐

Tôi đồng ý dữ liệu của mình được sử dụng cho các dự án nghiên cứu tiếp theo ☐

Tôi không đồng ý dữ liệu của mình được sử dụng cho các dự án nghiên cứu tiếp theo ☐

Chữ ký Ngày tháng năm

Tên người tham gia viết hoa

Appendix G1: Information Sheet and Consent Form for School Observation - For International School Principals (English)

SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Dear principal,

I am a PhD researcher from the Department of Education, Maynooth University, Ireland. As part of the requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr. Maija Salokangas and Dr. Anthony Malone. By this letter, I wish to seek for your permission to access *your school* as a research site to conduct a study ‘Exploring Vietnamese teacher’s *bản sắc* in the context of postcolonial education reform’. Your school was identified as an ideal site to explore this topic as it is an international school, with a strong presence of *international* education and values. Situated in Vietnam with such unique features, your school would provide interesting input for my research.

Purpose of the Study

The study is particularly interested in teachers’ perception of *bản sắc*. The focus of the study will be on teachers’ past and current experiences in schools and in Vietnamese society.

What will participating in the study involve?

The study will involve one-on-one online interviews with teachers, a discussion within a group of teachers, and a school visit of the researchers. Without your permission, observation will take place in your school. Vietnamese teachers will be observed inside the classrooms, in the staff room, in staff meetings, and in parental meetings. The visit will last up to a month and take place at a time that suits the school. The observation will not be recorded but handwritten notes will be taken.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because you are the principal of an international school that offers an ideal study site for this research. You will not be asked to be the participant of the observation. However, your assistance, in terms of access, is highly appreciated.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your time to provide me with access to the school. It is entirely up to you to decide whether you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason until 01/09/2024. You may do that by emailing Jessie.du@mu.ie. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

With your permission, teacher observation will take place in their classroom, staff room, staff meetings, and parental meetings. This is to study teachers' teaching practices, communication and relationship with other teachers, the school leaders, students, and parents. During the school visit, I will observe:

1. Teachers' interactions with students inside and outside the classrooms
2. Teachers' interactions with other teachers in the staff rooms, staff meetings and within the working environment
3. Teachers' interactions with school leaders (i.e, subject leaders, vice-principal, principal) in the staff rooms, staff meetings and within the working environment
4. Teachers' interactions with parents during parental meetings (if this happens during the observation period)

Due to your role as the principal, I would warmly welcome any insight you might be able to share on educational issues that you see as significant.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected from the school during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No true names will be identified at any time in our data analysis. The name of the school will be kept anonymous. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in our write-up in order to discuss the data efficiently. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the

researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by me - Ngoc Thao Du.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion. I am asked to communicate the following to any research participants:

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, the confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be stored in such a way, at MU, that it will not be possible to identify you, or your school. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. All data will be destroyed after ten years by Ngoc Thao Du. Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by Ngoc Thao Du in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up in my doctoral thesis and published in academic peer-reviewed journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request by emailing jessie.du@mu.ie

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

It will take some of your valuable time.

What if there is a problem? Please do get in touch with me if any issues arise (Jessie.du@mu.ie)

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, please contact me: Jessie.du@mu.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Appendix G2: Information Sheet and Consent Form for School Observation - For Public School Principals (Vietnamese)

BIỂU MẪU SRESC

PHIẾU CUNG CẤP THÔNG TIN VÀ CHẤP THUẬN THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Kính gửi quý Thầy/ Cô,

Tôi là nghiên cứu sinh đến từ khoa Giáo Dục, trường đại học Maynooth, Ireland. Công trình nghiên cứu này là 1 phần của luận án tiến sĩ Giáo Dục mang tên ‘Khám phá bản sắc của giáo viên Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đổi mới giáo dục’, dưới sự hướng dẫn và giám sát của TS. Maija Salokangas và TS. Anthony Malone. Tôi viết thư này nhằm bày tỏ mong muốn nhận được sự chấp thuận của Thầy/ Cô để tiến hành chuyến thực địa đến nhà trường. Nơi quý Thầy/ Cô đang công tác được xác định là địa điểm lý tưởng để thực hiện nghiên cứu này vì đây là một ngôi trường công lập có uy tín, có nền tảng vững chắc trong hệ thống giáo dục Việt Nam.

Mục đích nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm khai thác suy nghĩ và nhận thức của giáo viên về bản sắc của chính mình. Nội dung công trình nghiên cứu sẽ chú trọng vào trải nghiệm và kinh nghiệm giảng dạy của giáo viên khi làm việc trong nhà trường và trong xã hội Việt Nam.

Nội dung tham gia nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này bao gồm phỏng vấn online 1-1 với giáo viên, thảo luận nhóm giữa các giáo viên, và chuyến đi thực địa đến nhà trường. Thông qua thư này, tôi trân trọng xin phép đi thực địa đến nhà trường nhằm quan sát những hoạt động hằng ngày trong trường của giáo viên. Việc quan sát sẽ diễn ra bên trong lớp học, trong phòng giáo viên, các cuộc họp nhân viên và các cuộc họp phụ huynh (nếu có). Chuyến thực địa sẽ kéo dài một tháng và diễn ra vào thời điểm phù hợp với lịch làm việc của nhà trường. Việc quan sát sẽ không được ghi hình lại mà sẽ được tôi ghi chép bằng tay.

Đơn vị chấp thuận nghiên cứu

Đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu đã được xét duyệt và chấp thuận bởi hội đồng Đạo Đức nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Nếu có nhu cầu, phiếu chấp thuận đề tài và nội dung nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi đến quý Thầy/ Cô.

Lý do tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô hiện đang là thành viên trong ban lãnh đạo của một ngôi trường công lập có uy tín tại Việt Nam. Tuy các hoạt động của ban lãnh đạo nhà trường sẽ không được quan sát, tôi rất trân trọng cảm ơn nếu quý Thầy/ Cô có thể chấp thuận và hỗ trợ chuyến thực địa này.

Chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu

Quý Thầy/ Cô không bắt buộc phải tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu này. Tuy nhiên tôi hi vọng quý Thầy/ Cô có thể chấp thuận và hỗ trợ chuyến thực địa. Quý Thầy/ Cô hoàn toàn có thể rút lui cho đến trước ngày 01/09/2024 bằng cách gửi thư đến địa chỉ email Jessie.du@mu.ie. Quyết định tham gia hay rút lui hoàn toàn sẽ không ảnh hưởng đến mối quan hệ giữa Thầy/ Cô và nghiên cứu sinh cũng như với trường đại học Maynooth.

Nội dung chuyến thực địa

Với sự cho phép của quý Thầy/ Cô, chuyến thực địa sẽ bao gồm việc quan sát các hoạt động hằng ngày giáo viên trong nhà trường, trong lớp học, trong phòng giáo viên, và trong các cuộc họp nhân viên và các cuộc họp phụ huynh (nếu có). Mục đích của việc quan sát là để tìm hiểu sự giao tiếp và mối quan hệ của giáo viên với đồng nghiệp, lãnh đạo trường, học sinh, và phụ huynh. Nội dung quan sát sẽ bao gồm:

1. Sự tương tác của giáo viên với học sinh trong và ngoài lớp.
2. Sự tương tác của giáo viên với các đồng nghiệp trong phòng giáo viên, trong các cuộc họp và trong môi trường giảng dạy của nhà trường nói chung.
3. Sự tương tác của giáo viên với ban lãnh đạo nhà trường (ví dụ như với trưởng bộ môn, hiệu trưởng và hiệu phó) trong các cuộc họp và trong môi trường giảng dạy của nhà trường nói chung.
4. Sự tương tác của giáo viên với phụ huynh trong những buổi họp phụ huynh (nếu có).

Với cương vị là thành viên của ban lãnh đạo nhà trường, mọi ý kiến đóng góp của quý Thầy/ Cô về những vấn đề trong giáo dục và xã hội Việt Nam đều được nhiệt thành trân trọng.

Bảo mật khi tham gia nghiên cứu

Mọi thông tin thu thập được trong quá trình thực địa đều được cẩn trọng bảo mật. Tất cả những tên riêng (họ tên cá nhân) và tên nhà trường sẽ không được tiết lộ. Thay vào đó, mật danh sẽ được sử dụng khi phân tích và xuất bản dữ liệu. Tất cả các bản in giấy (nếu có) sẽ được bảo quản trong ngăn kéo được khóa kín trong phòng nghiên cứu của trường đại học Maynooth. Tất cả mọi văn bản điện tử mã hóa và lưu trữ bảo đảm trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth và chỉ được truy

cập bởi tôi - nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo. Tất cả mọi thông tin đều sẽ không được cung cấp cho bất kỳ tổ chức hoặc cá nhân thứ ba nào. Nếu có nhu cầu, quý Thầy/ Cô sẽ được cung cấp những thông tin thu thập được trong quá trình quan sát. Với tư cách là một nhà nghiên cứu, tôi được yêu cầu truyền đạt những điều sau đây tới quý Thầy/ Cô:

‘Trong một vài trường hợp, tính bảo mật của nghiên cứu và tính bảo mật của dữ liệu và hồ sơ nghiên cứu có thể bị tòa án hủy bỏ trong trường hợp kiện tụng hoặc trong quá trình điều tra của cơ quan pháp lý. Trong những trường hợp như vậy, Nhà trường sẽ thực hiện tất cả các bước thích hợp theo luật để đảm bảo rằng tính bảo mật được duy trì ở mức độ lớn nhất có thể.’

Lưu trữ thông tin dữ liệu

Khi dữ liệu được lưu trữ ở trường đại học Maynooth, mọi thông tin cá nhân về Thầy/ Cô hoặc nhà trường nơi Thầy/ Cô công tác sẽ được bảo mật. Sau khi hoàn thành công trình nghiên cứu, thông tin dữ liệu sẽ được lưu lại trên máy chủ của trường đại học Maynooth.

Tất cả mọi thông tin dữ liệu sẽ bị hủy sau 10 năm do chính nghiên cứu sinh - Du Ngọc Thảo. Dữ liệu thủ công (bản in giấy) sẽ được phân nhỏ một cách bảo mật và dữ liệu điện tử sẽ được định dạng lại hoặc ghi đè bởi Du Ngọc Thảo, trường đại học Maynooth.

Kết quả nghiên cứu

Nghiên cứu này sẽ được viết thành luận án tiến sĩ của tôi và được xuất bản trên các tạp chí khoa học được bình duyệt. Nếu có nhu cầu, bản sao của kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được cung cấp cho quý Thầy/ Cô bằng cách gửi thư về địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Bắt cập của việc tham gia nghiên cứu

Việc tham gia nghiên cứu sẽ làm mất một chút thời gian quý báu của quý Thầy/ Cô.

Trong trường hợp có vấn đề phát sinh, quý Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu có thắc mắc thêm, quý Thầy/ Cô có thể liên hệ tôi thông qua địa chỉ email Jessie.Du@mu.ie

Nếu đồng ý tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu, xin quý Thầy/ Cô vui lòng điền và ký tên vào phiếu chấp thuận tham gia nghiên cứu.

Chân thành cảm ơn quý Thầy/ Cô đã dành thời gian để đọc thư này.

Appendix H: Themes, sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis – Bản

Sub-theme	Codes	Total number of quotes (for both groups of teachers)
Individual preference	Teaching subject preferences Career preferences Hobbies Others	47
Perception of themselves	Perception of characteristics Perception of skills/ expertise	47
Independent pronouns	“Tôi” (I) “Minh” (I)	1316

Table H1: Independent self: Sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis (translated from Vietnamese)

Sub-theme	Codes	Total number of quotes (for both groups of teachers)
Influence on others	Influences on students Influences on colleagues	54
Influenced by others	Influenced by family members Influenced by former teachers Influenced by friends Influenced by society	111
Perceive others	Perceive family members Perceive former teachers Perceive other teachers from different schools	122
Relate to others during the	Observation of other teachers	130

speech	Relate to the researcher Relate to the expectations of society Relate to public discourses	
Perception of the work environment	Perceive students Perceive students' parents Perceive colleagues Perceive school leaders Perceive international education (for international school teachers)	44
Influenced by the work environment	Influenced by the school climate Influenced by students Influenced by students' parents Influenced by colleagues Influenced by workload Influenced by curricula Influenced by English (for international school teachers)	58
Influenced by wider society	Societal standings Expectations from society Vietnamese culture related to education	67
Interdependent/ hierarchical pronouns	"em", "chị", "anh", "cô", "mình"	1628
Honorifics	"dạ", "thưa", "vâng"	22

Table H2: Interdependent self: Sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis (translated from Vietnamese)

Appendix I: Themes, sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis – Three domains

Sub-theme	Code	Total number of quotes (for both groups of teachers)
Past experiences	Teacher education Experiences in schools Socioeconomic background Family influence	146
Present experiences	See the social domain	See the social domain
The imagined future	Future goals Future expectations	34
Changes	Changes in personality Changes in skills/ expertise Changes in perception about teaching	43

Table II: The temporal domain: Sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis (translated from Vietnamese)

Sub-theme	Code	Total number of quotes (for both groups of teachers)
Relationship and interaction with students	Perceived relationship with students Interaction inside the classroom Interaction outside the classroom Interaction outside the school Interaction methods Language of interactions (for international school teachers)	111
Relationship and interaction with colleagues	Perceived relationship with older colleagues	80

	Perceived relationship with younger colleagues	
	Perceived relationship with colleagues of the same age	
	Topics of interactions/ conversation	
	How often interactions take place	
	Interaction methods	
	Language of interactions (for international school teachers)	
	Conflicts	
Relationship and interaction with school leaders	Perceived relationship with school leaders	56
	Topics of interactions/ conversation	
	How often interactions take place	
	Interaction methods	
	Language of interactions (for international school teachers)	
	Conflict	
Relationship and interaction with parents	Perceived relationship with parents	56
	Topics of interactions/ conversation	
	How often interactions take place	
	Interaction methods	
	Language of interactions (for international school teachers)	
	Conflict	
Overall perception of the working environment	School climate	132
	Classroom atmosphere	
	School organisation	
	Workload	
	Curricula	
	Education philosophies (for international school teachers)	

Table I2: The social domain: Sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis (translated from Vietnamese)

Sub-theme	Code	Total number
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		of quotes (for both groups of teachers)
Societal standing	Prestige Societal role	38
Society's values and expectations	Morality Society's value for education Societal expectations Mould	93
Values as a teacher	How teachers define teaching The values teachers bring to society Provide students with knowledge Inspire students Change students' awareness	52
Connection with other teachers in society	How often teachers interact with teachers from different schools/ sectors Perception of this connection Barriers	22

Table I3: The spatial domain: Sub-themes, and codes of interview data analysis (translated from Vietnamese)

Appendix J: Ethics Approval

Main Details

- Project Title : Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study

- Status : APPROVE

- Principal Investigator (PI) : Ngoc Thao Du

- Suggested request tier / level : Tier 2

- Suggestion approval committee : Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee

- Details / Rationale : My research works with adults (with the exception of those identified as vulnerable) where the material is of a non-sensitive nature and where the research subjects may be identified either directly or through key/indicators linked to subjects. This includes surveys, interviews and/or observational studies.

- Proposed Start date : 24/12/2023

- Proposed End date : 20/10/2024

- Is your project in receipt of research funding? : No

- Previous ethical approval for this project : No

- Add contact details of institution if applicable :

- Research Methodology and Methods to be used : Interviews and/or Focus groups, Observation/ Ethnography

- Other methodologies :

- Total number of participants : 30

- Will the research be carried out with persons under age 18? : No

- Will the research be carried out with adults who might be considered vulnerable in any way?
: No

- What will be the nature of their participation? : One-time / short term contract

- Other participation type :

- Personal Data Categories : Name, Date of Birth, Personal Email, Personal contact number

- Sensitive Personal Data Categories : Cultural

- Other Sensitive Data Categories :

- Please indicate the indicative date when that the personal identifiable data will be destroyed or rendered irreversibly anonymised :

- Has a Data Protection Impact assessment been completed and submitted? : No

Collaborators

Collaborator Name	Institution	Address	Institution Address	Qualification / Student Number	Role on Project
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Dr. Maija Salokangas	Maynooth University	maiya.salokangas@mu.ie	Supervisor	Research Supervisor
Dr. Anthony Malone	Maynooth University	Anthony.malone@mu.ie	Supervisor	Research Supervisor

Attachments

File name	Uploaded by
GDPR Ethics application.pdf Thao Du - Ethics application	Ngoc Thao Du (20/11/2023 4:20:12 PM)
GDPR Ethics application edited 0612.pdf This is the edited version based on the comments I received on 06/12. On the last page of the document, I included a separate point-by-point response addressing the comments I received.	Ngoc Thao Du (06/12/2023 2:41:41 PM)
GDPR Ethics application (edited responses added).pdf This is the edited version based on the comments I received. On the last page of the document, I included a separate point-by-point response addressing each of the comments I received.	Ngoc Thao Du (05/12/2023 4:22:04 PM)

Comments

Comments	Uploaded by
Dear reviewers, Please find a Tier 2 application for review. Many thanks Valerie	Valerie Bartley (27/11/2023 3:11:28 PM)
Dear reviewers, Please find the response to your comments for approval. Many thanks Valerie	Valerie Bartley (05/12/2023 4:26:42 PM)
Re Project Title: Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study. 04/12/2023 Dear Ngoc Thao Du, The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 expedited review. A request for further information/clarification is uploaded to this record. Best regards Valerie	Valerie Bartley (04/12/2023 10:31:40 AM)
Title: Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study Dear Ngoc, The above research ethics amendments for the project have been evaluated under Tier 2 expedited review. A request for further following information/clarification is uploaded to this record.	Valerie Bartley (06/12/2023 11:19:03 AM)

Best regards Valerie	
Dear reviewers, Please find the response to your comments for approval. Many thanks Valerie	Valerie Bartley (07/12/2023 12:09:28 PM)
Re Project entitled: Exploring Vietnamese teachers' bản sắc in the context of postcolonial education reform: A comparative study Dear Ngoc, The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted. A letter of ethical approval and end of project report form are uploaded to this record. Best regards Valerie	Valerie Bartley (11/12/2023 1:25:11 PM)

Appendix K: Fieldnotes hand-sketches

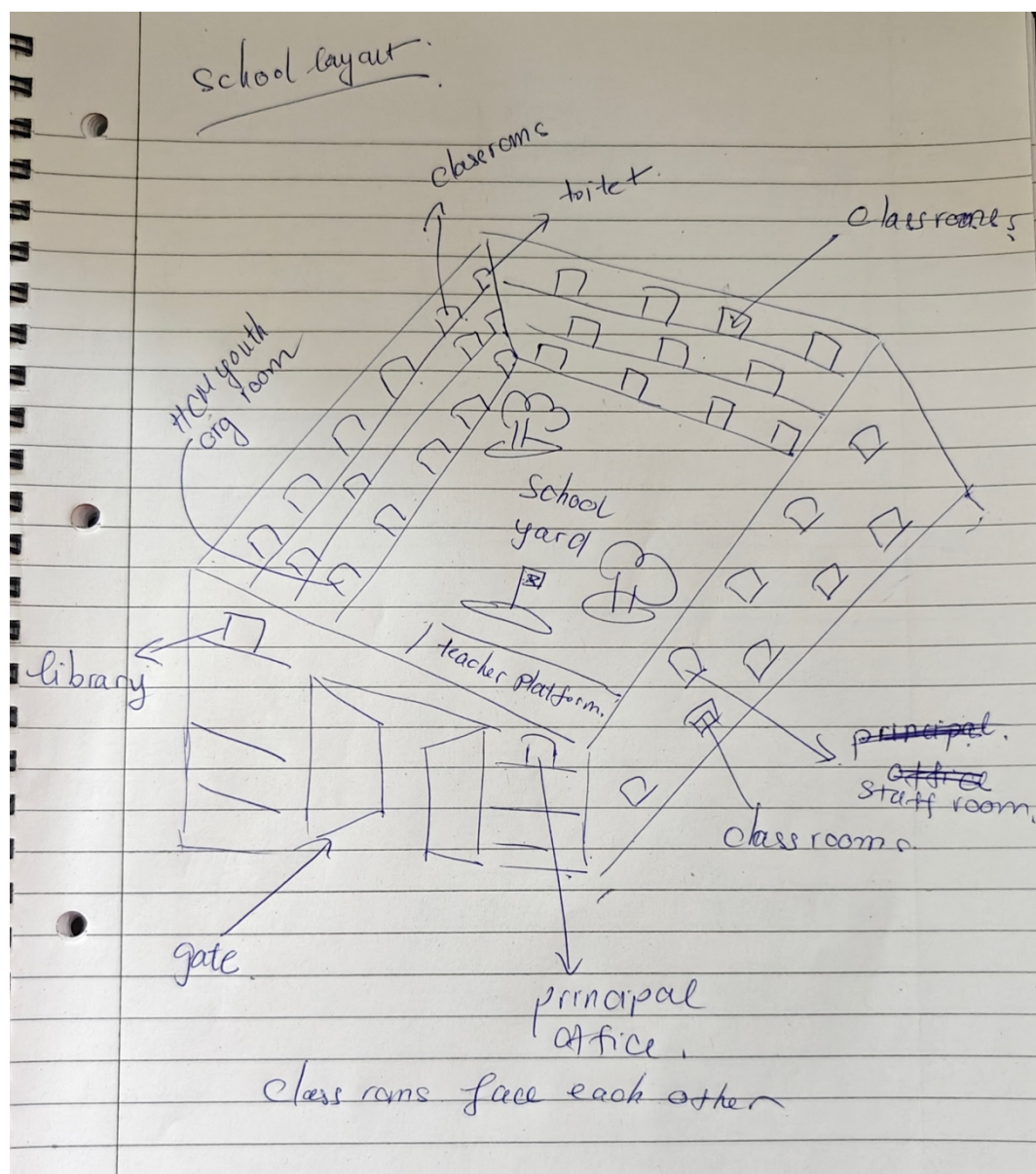


Image K 1: Public school's layout

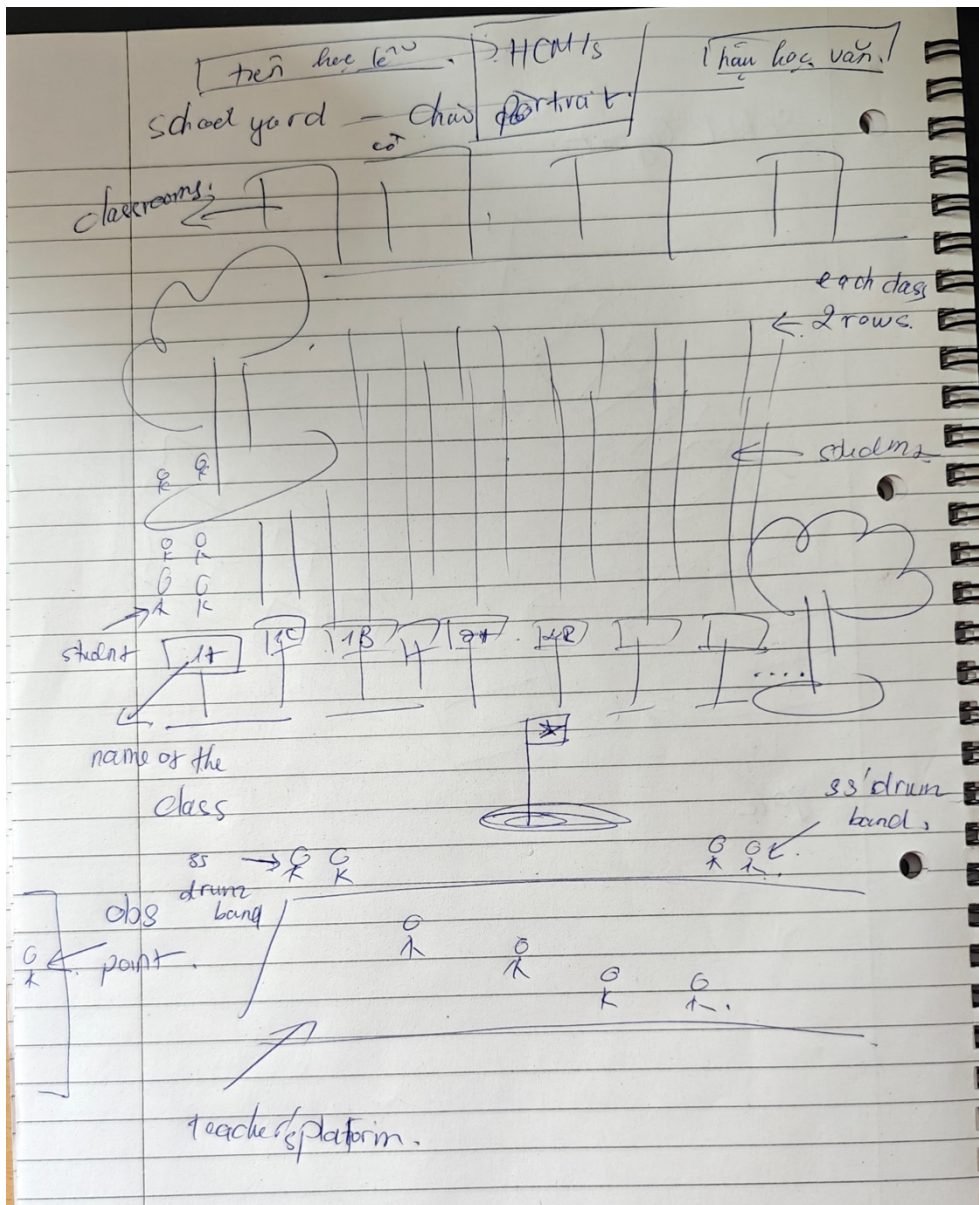


Image K2: Flag salutation rite – Public school

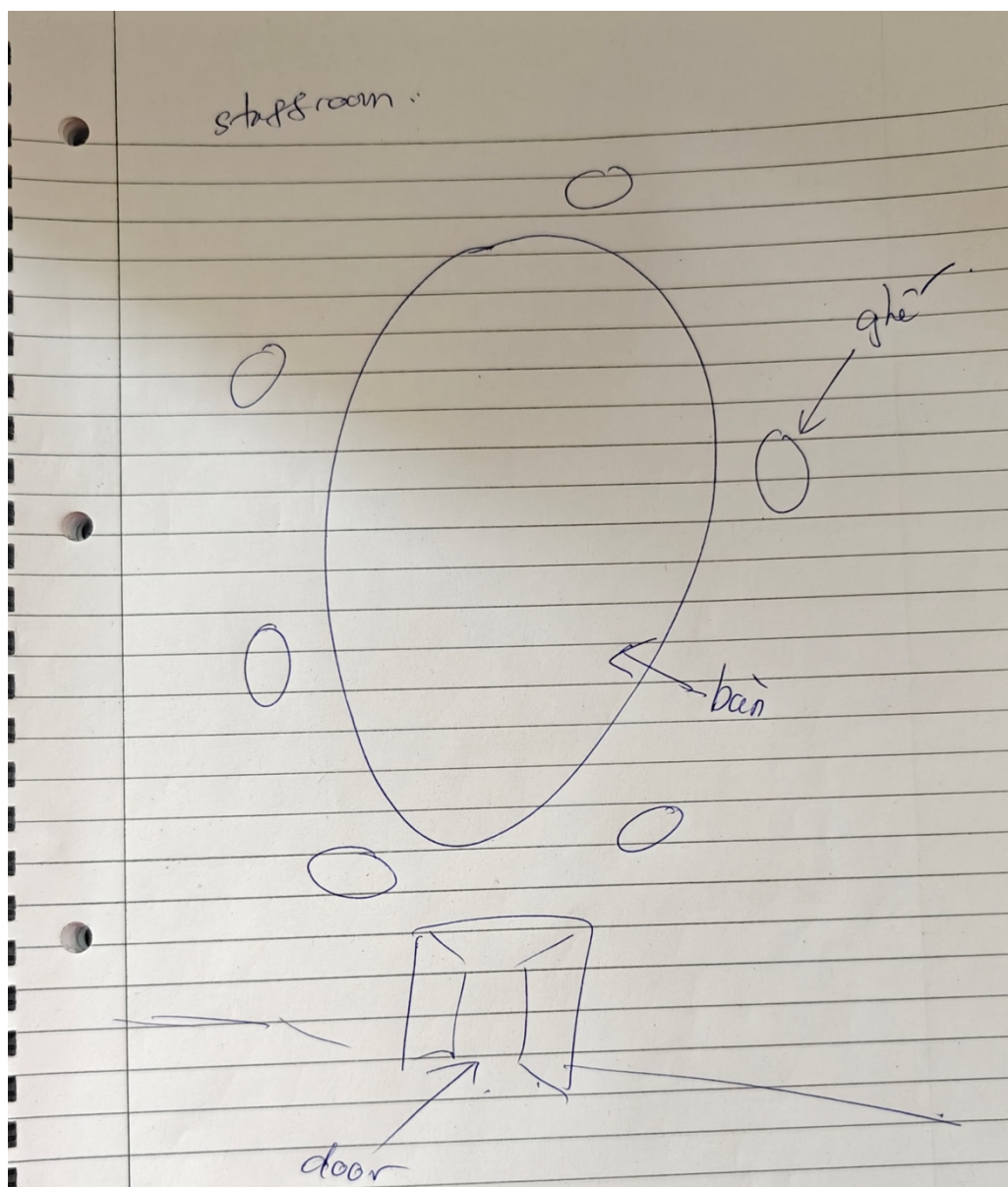


Image K4: Staff room – Public school

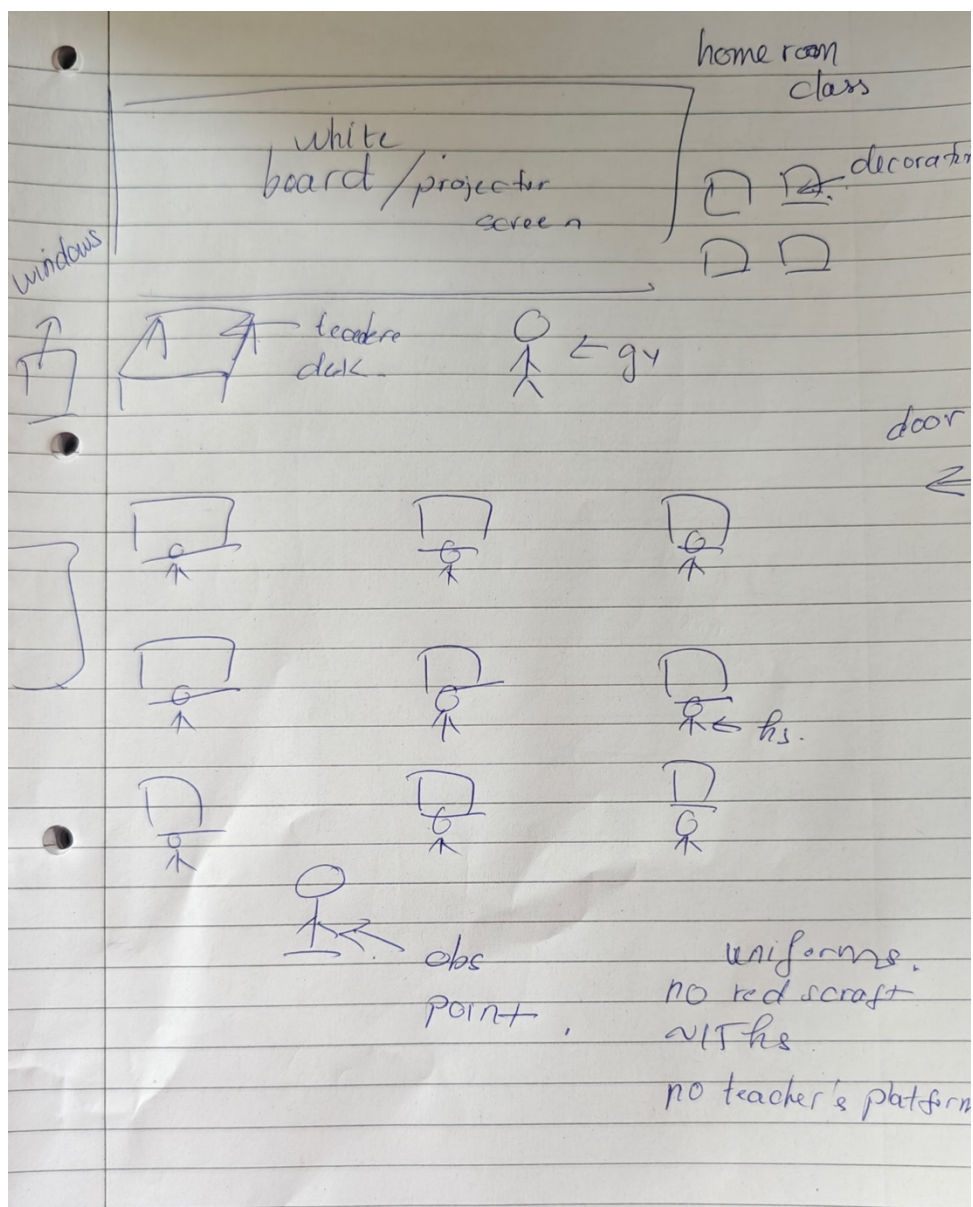


Image K5: Classroom layout (homeroom class) – International school

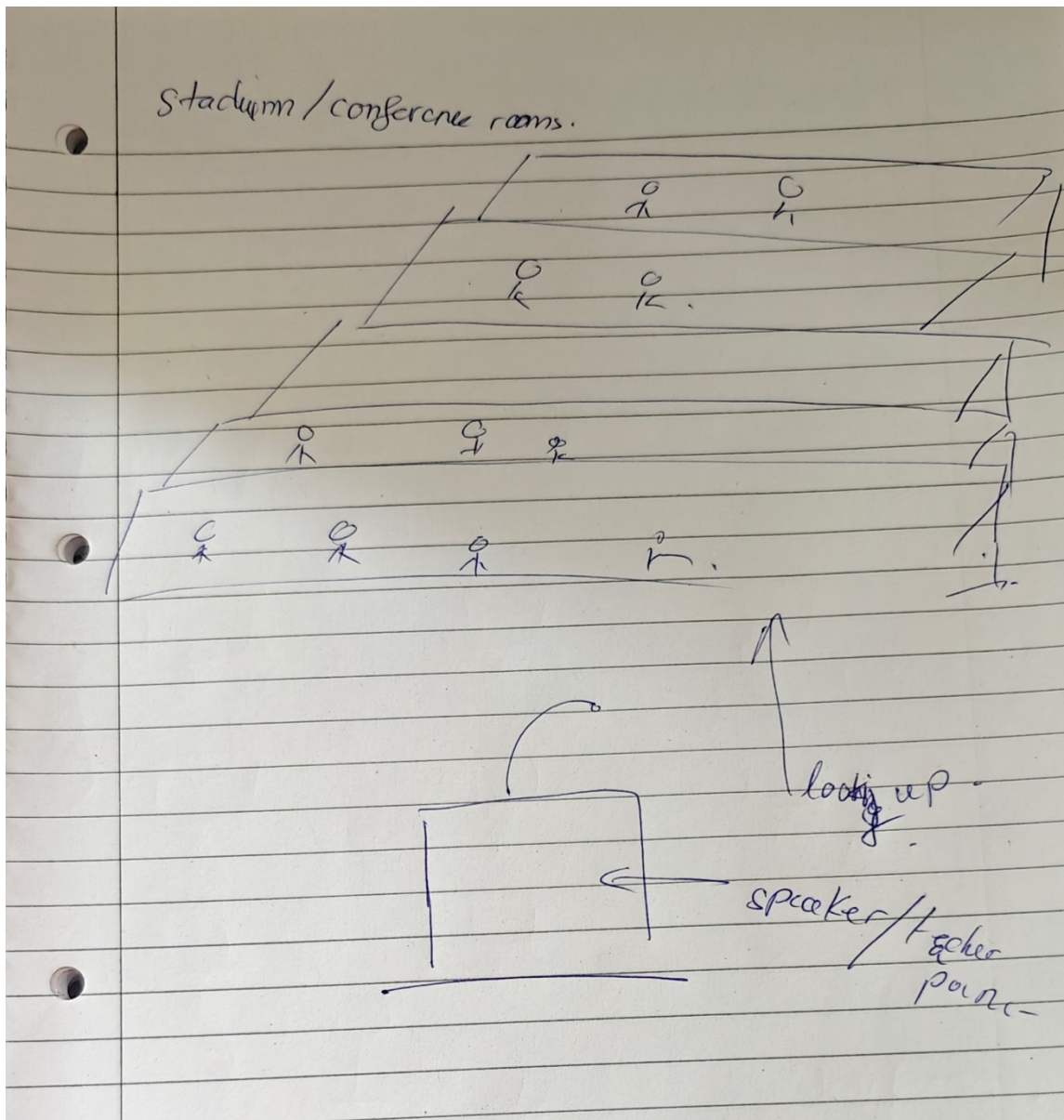


Image K6: Information/ school gathering point (not a room) - International school

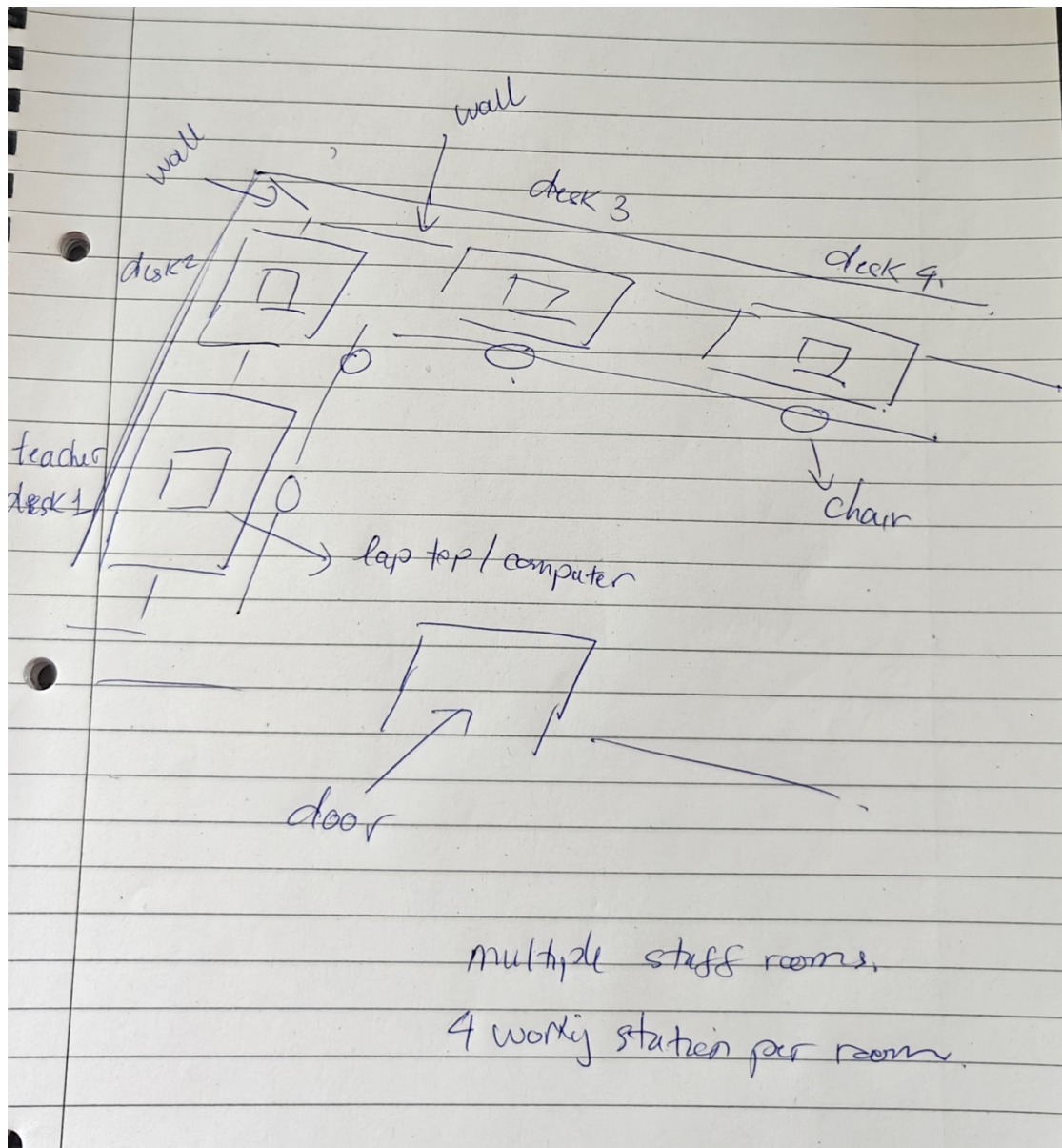


Image K7: Staff room – International school

Appendix L1: Observation data (for checking with the school principal) - Public school (in Vietnamese)

Quan sát trong lớp học

Nội dung	Ghi chú
Tương tác của giáo viên với học sinh	- Giáo viên thường xuyên nhắc nhở các bạn học sinh im lặng - Giáo viên kèm sát học sinh trong tiết tập viết - Giáo viên giám sát các bạn học sinh làm bài - Hầu hết các giáo viên đều có một cây thước gỗ, giáo viên hay gõ thước lên bàn khi nhắc nhở học sinh - Giáo viên khuyến khích và yêu cầu học sinh đọc bài to rõ - Giáo viên khuyến khích học sinh khen nhau và vỗ tay khi bạn trả lời đúng - Giáo viên giảng bài và giao bài tập cho học sinh, sau đó học sinh làm bài trong sách bài tập, và cả lớp sửa bài - Hầu hết giáo viên yêu cầu học sinh giơ tay để phát biểu → giáo viên chọn 1 học sinh để phát biểu - Giáo viên nhắc nhở học sinh phải dạ thưa khi phát biểu - Giáo viên thường xuyên nhắc nhở tác phong của học sinh - Giáo viên khuyến khích học sinh nhận xét câu trả lời của bạn mình - Một vài giáo viên vào lớp sớm với học sinh - Trước khi bắt đầu tiết học: giáo viên điều phối kỷ luật học sinh - Các giáo viên có tổ chức những hoạt động nhóm - Giáo viên khích lệ học sinh đứng lên bục giảng để đọc bài hoặc để điều phối lớp - Ngôn ngữ được sử dụng: cô - con, cô - các bạn Kết quả quan sát toàn bộ một tiết Tiếng Anh - Giáo viên không bắt buộc học sinh phải giơ tay để phát biểu - Bầu không khí thoải mái - Giáo viên nhiệt tình trả lời các câu hỏi học sinh đặt ra - Giáo viên thoải mái khi học sinh tự do phát biểu ý kiến - Giáo viên không nhắc nhở học sinh nhiều về vấn đề kỷ luật

	- Khi có vấn đề phát sinh, giáo viên nhắc nhở học sinh thay vì khiển trách - Giáo viên đưa ra hướng dẫn rõ ràng - Ngôn ngữ được giáo viên sử dụng: “bạn nào có thể...”, “các con có muốn...”. Giáo viên cảm ơn và khen học sinh khi các bạn phát biểu - Giáo viên khuyến khích học sinh tư duy bằng việc tóm tắt bài học - Giáo viên khuyến khích học sinh bằng việc cho điểm và ghi tên các bạn lên bảng - Giáo viên có tổ chức game, hỏi ý kiến học sinh, giáo viên để cả lớp quyết định kết quả của game thay vì tự mình quyết định - Giáo viên không bắt buộc học sinh phải đứng lên để trả lời - Vào cuối giờ giáo viên có hỏi các bạn học sinh xem các bạn có hiểu bài không - Giáo viên được học sinh đứng lên chào vào đầu tiết và cuối tiết
Bố trí lớp học	- Bàn giáo viên ở trên bục giảng - Lớp có khoảng 20-30 học sinh - Trên tường phía bục giảng có treo ảnh Bác và châm ngôn: Dạy tốt, học tốt, có treo 5 điều Bác Hồ dạy và trích dẫn thư của chủ tịch HCM - Lớp có máy chiếu (TV)
Hoạt động và hình thức	Kỷ luật lớp: lớp phải im lặng - Tất cả các lớp học đều mở cửa - Đa số giáo viên sử dụng slide - Hầu hết giáo viên ghi ngày tháng lên bảng - Giáo viên được học sinh đứng lên chào (bằng lời) vào đầu tiết và cuối tiết - Học sinh học tất cả các môn tại lớp (không di chuyển từ lớp này sang lớp khác) trừ môn thể dục
Một vài ghi chú khác	- Nhìn chung hầu hết các giáo viên nghiêm khắc với học sinh, đặc biệt là khi nói về các vấn đề kỷ luật - Nhìn chung học sinh vâng lời giáo viên, có khoảng cách giữa giáo viên và học sinh - Đa số giáo viên quan trọng việc ghi chép của học sinh - Việc vở sạch chữ đẹp được chú trọng

	- Các tiết học của giáo viên chủ nhiệm nhìn chung căng thẳng hơn - Việc hoàn thành bài tập trong sách giáo khoa được chú trọng - Giáo viên đôi khi rất nghiêm khắc với học sinh
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Quan sát ngoài lớp học: hoạt động chào cờ

Nội dung	Ghi chú
Tương tác của giáo viên với học sinh	- Một vài giáo viên vào lớp sớm với các bạn học sinh - Giáo viên điều phối học sinh xếp hàng - Giáo viên giám sát học sinh trong suốt buổi chào cờ - Giáo viên (tổng phụ trách) tuyên dương các học sinh ngồi đẹp - Giáo viên (tổng phụ trách) phổ biến về nề nếp (kỷ luật) của nhà trường - Giáo viên (tổng phụ trách) nhắc nhở trước toàn trường về các hành vi chưa tốt của học sinh - Giáo viên truyền tải thông tin từ trên sân khấu - Giáo viên và học sinh hát bài hát truyền thống của trường
Tương tác của giáo viên với nhau	- Giáo viên tương tác với nhau chủ yếu về công việc - Giáo viên tương tác với nhau chủ yếu về các hoạt động trong trường - Giáo viên giao tiếp với nhau theo hình thức không trang trọng - Các giáo viên lâu năm có vẻ thân thiết với nhau hơn - Các giáo viên đôi khi qua lớp nhau để trao đổi các vấn đề chuyên môn và mượn vật dụng - Nhìn chung các giáo viên tương tác thân thiện với nhau - Giáo viên đôi khi họp với hiệu trưởng và có giao tiếp với hiệu trưởng
Giáo viên tương tác với phụ huynh	- Phụ huynh không được vào trường trừ một vài trường hợp đặc biệt - Giáo viên ít tương tác trực tiếp với phụ huynh mỗi ngày - Giáo viên có liên lạc với phụ huynh qua zalo

Hoạt động và hình thức	Lễ chào cờ vào sáng thứ 2 từ 7h đến 7h45 - Học sinh tập trung chào cờ ở sân trường - Học sinh mang ghế xếp hàng theo lớp để chào cờ, học sinh ngồi quay mặt về phía bục (sân khấu) - Giáo viên ngồi trên sân khấu, hướng về phía học sinh. Một vài giáo viên đứng cuối hàng phía sau học sinh - Tất cả các giáo viên đều mặc áo dài - 50% giáo viên có tuổi và 50% giáo viên trẻ - Chào cờ có trống, nhạc quốc ca và đội ca
Khuôn viên trường và không khí trong trường	- Trường không gian mở, các lớp học xoay mặt vào nhau, sân trường ở giữa - Trường có treo hình bác hồ và châm ngôn: tiên học lễ, hậu học văn Không khí trang trọng khi chào cờ

Quan sát bên ngoài lớp học: hoạt động tập thể dự buổi sáng

Nội dung	Ghi chú
Tương tác của giáo viên với học sinh	- Giáo viên điều phối học sinh xếp hàng, giáo viên so hàng cho học sinh - Giáo viên nghiêm khắc khi điều phối học sinh - Giáo viên nhắc nhở kỷ luật học sinh (không nói chuyện) - Giáo viên (tổng phụ trách) ra hiệu lệnh trên sân khấu, các giáo viên chủ nhiệm minh họa động tác - Giáo viên điều phối học sinh xếp hàng vào lớp
Tương tác của giáo viên với nhau	- Trong các hoạt động toàn trường vào đầu giờ, các giáo viên tương tác vui vẻ với nhau

Giáo viên tương tác với phụ huynh	Không có dữ liệu được ghi nhận
Hoạt động và hình thức	- Đa số các giáo viên là giáo viên nữ - Nhìn chung các giáo viên nữ không nhuộm màu tóc nổi, ít đeo trang sức - Tất cả các giáo viên nữ mặc áo dài
Khuôn viên trường và không khí trong trường	- Trường có treo quốc kỳ

Appendix L2: Observation data (for checking with the headteacher) - International school (in English)

- School starts on the 27th of August
- No flag salute session, no national anthem. All students in the school get together once a month
- 2 programmes: international (IB curriculum) and bilingual (with a combination of Vietnamese national curriculum). Tuition fees for international programmes are more expensive
- Classes are labelled with different letters, A - class for international programme, B C D - class for bilingual programme
- In the bilingual programme, teachers teach some subjects in Vietnamese
- The school is organised by units, 10 units each floor
- The school is built for a practice-based curriculum
- The curriculum is practice based → facilities support this curriculum, e.g., students study physics and chemistry in a lab
- All classrooms face the front → every classroom has a big window to catch sunlight
- The school uses solar panels which account for $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total energy
- Home-economic subject: students learn how to cook. The home-economic class is built like a kitchen. Home-economic is a compulsory subject from grade 1-9
- 13 students a class, 400 students a whole schools
- The school teaches from grade 1-12, divided by primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary (the same as the public system). Primary and secondary levels are on different floors but students freely move among the floors
- Students don't stay in the same classroom but move to different classrooms for different subjects. There is a homeroom classroom for homeroom activities and homeroom subject
- There is a big cafeteria: students and teachers sessions are separate, but sometimes students and teachers have lunch together
- School hours: 8am-11.35am and 12.25pm-3.50pm, each teaching session is 45-minutes long
- Hard to recruit expat teachers
- Students at the primary level study craft and sewing a subject, with practice
- All walls are soundproofed
- Students can freely use the craft, sewing, and classrooms and all the machines in there as long as they are supervised
- There are multiple teacher's rooms, 4 teachers in a room. Each unit has its own teacher's room. Teachers rarely interact in the teacher's rooms as they have different schedules
- Socialist ideologies are not focused

- Students wear uniforms, teachers don't have uniform but they have a dress code. Female teachers don't wear the traditional dress (áo dài)

- Safety control is emphasised

- Students are not divided by ethnic groups, they socialise well, and the common language is english

- Every student is well- taken care of → student-centred

- Every door is with swipe-access

- Teacher's meetings take place in the school library

- It is hard to recruit expat teachers. Expat teachers who are not finnish do not stay long in employment

- The school has a director (Vietnamese) and a principal (expatriate). The director takes care of the management responsibilities while the principal is on the academic side

- Homeroom teachers are free to decorate their homeroom class to their liking

- The school corridor is decorated with living animals in the fish tanks