

Relationship Between Multicultural Educational Environment and Social Skills of 5–6-Year-Old Children in Northern Midlands and Mountainous Region of Vietnam

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the theoretical foundation and proposes a conceptual research model examining the relationship between the Multicultural Educational Environment (MEE) and the Social Skills (SS) of 5–6-year-old children in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region of Vietnam. Utilizing systematic literature review, content analysis, and theoretical synthesis methods, the study synthesizes existing literature on multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and early childhood social skill development. The synthesized findings suggest conceptualizing the MEE along two primary dimensions: physical conditions and the socio-emotional environment. These dimensions are operationalized through space, learning materials, pedagogical practices, peer interactions, and school-family-community collaboration. Children's social skills are approached through observable behaviors in communication, cooperation and sharing, conflict resolution, and adaptation to group activities. On this basis, the paper proposes a theoretical model depicting the anticipated relationships between MEE components and children's social skills, while outlining pedagogical orientations suited to the local cultural context. This conceptual model serves as a reference framework for developing measurement instruments and conducting empirical research in preschools across the region.

Keywords: Multicultural educational environment; social skills; 5-6-year-old children; early childhood education; Northern Midlands and Mountains.

Date of Submission: 28-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 06-10-2026

I. Introduction

Multicultural Education originated from civil rights movements and educational reform initiatives worldwide in the 1970s (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997), aiming to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of ethnic, racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 2019). In the context of globalization and increasing cultural diversity within society, multicultural education has emerged as a strategic approach to improving educational quality, equity, and international integration capacity within Vietnam's national education system.

The Northern Midlands and Mountainous region of Vietnam is a strategic territory holding vital significance for economic, social, defense, and security development (Decision No. 610/QĐ-TTg, 2026). It is the long-standing homeland of over 30 ethnic minority groups—including the Tay, Nung, Thai, Muong, H'Mong, Dao, San Chay, and San Diu—forming a rich and diverse cultural landscape while presenting substantial challenges for the educational system (Vu, 2023). According to summary reports from the Program "Support for Early Childhood Education Development in Disadvantaged Areas for the 2022–2030 Period" (Decision No. 1609/QĐ-TTg, 2022; Uyen Na, 2020) and UNICEF evaluations (2022), although school enrollment rates for children aged 3–5 in this region have reached high levels (exceeding 95%), the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) for children aged 2–4 and 5 in several mountainous provinces remains among the lowest in the country (reaching only 69%). The primary barriers facing ethnic minority children include language communication gaps, disconnects between home/community culture and school environments, and a lack of essential social skills necessary to adapt to collective learning environments (Giang, 2019; Nguyen & Cao, 2022).

For preschool children, particularly those aged 5–6—a transitional milestone preparing for elementary school entry—social skill development plays a decisive role in adaptability, academic readiness, and future personality formation (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Nguyen, 2026). Social skills encompass more than verbal communication; they represent a complex system of pro-social behaviors that enable children to interact effectively, establish positive relationships, cooperate, and resolve peer conflicts (Dang & Tran, 2014; Luong &

Phan, 2020). In the Northern Mountainous region, where preschool classrooms function as multicultural spaces due to the co-presence of children from diverse ethnic groups, constructing an appropriate MEE has become an urgent necessity (Nguyen & Tran, 2024; Nguyen, 2016).

Although multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, and preschool social skill development have been addressed in existing literature, a systematic framework linking multicultural educational environment characteristics to specific social skill indicators among 5-6 year-old children within the specific context of Northern Vietnam requires further theoretical elaboration. Specifically, there is an imperative need to clarify the core components of the multicultural educational environment, the interactive mechanisms influencing social skill acquisition, and the contextual adaptation of international research findings to local cultural and linguistic conditions.

II. Material and methods

This study was conducted using Systematic Literature Review (Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2024) and Theoretical Synthesis methodologies. The underlying data source comprises foundational and contemporary domestic and international scholarly literature retrieved from reputable databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and Vietnam Journals Online). Legal frameworks and policy decisions enacted by the Vietnamese Government and the Ministry of Education and Training concerning early childhood education in disadvantaged regions (MoET, 2021; Decision No. 1609/QĐ-TTg, 2022) were integrated as contextual references. The paper applies Content Analysis, Comparative Analysis, and Systems Structuring methods to: Conceptualize core constructs: Multicultural Educational Environment (Banks & Banks, 2019; UNESCO, 2006), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ng et al., 2022; Solehuddin & Budiman, 2019), and Social Skills of 5–6-year-old children (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Nguyen, 2026); Delineate and categorize constituent attributes of the MEE in mountainous preschools (Nguyen & Tran, 2024; Sanders et al., 2019); Analyze impact matrices and construct a theoretical framework illustrating the relationship between MEE characteristics and children's social skill indicators, anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978). The research procedure involved three sequential steps: Literature search via Google Scholar using combinations of keywords (multicultural education + Social Skills + preschool education) spanning the publication range from 2003 to 2026; Screening and exclusion of non-peer-reviewed articles or publications from journals not indexed in Scimago; In-depth content analysis of retrieved studies. Following filtering based on predefined criteria, 21 eligible peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical papers were included in the final content analysis ($n = 21$).

III. Results and discussion

1. Structural Components of the Multicultural Educational Environment and Preschoolers' Social Skills

1.1. Constituent Characteristics of the Multicultural Educational Environment in Preschools

A Multicultural Educational Environment (MEE) is defined as a holistic system of physical, linguistic, socio-emotional, and pedagogical conditions wherein children's cultural, linguistic, and familial backgrounds are respected, reflected, and leveraged as educational assets (UNESCO, 2006; NAEYC, 2019). Synthesizing existing literature, this study conceptualizes MEE along two core dimensions: Physical environment and multicultural learning materials (X_1); Socio-emotional environment and culturally responsive pedagogical practices (X_2).

1.1.1. Physical Environment and Multicultural Materials (X_1)

- *Cultural Space and Activity Corners ($X_{1.1}$):* Spatial arrangement incorporating artifacts, traditional attire, musical instruments, handicrafts, imagery, and games reflective of local ethnic communities. These physical anchors facilitate exploratory learning, communication, and peer play interactions (Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2019).
- *Culturally Diverse Materials, Tools, and Toys ($X_{1.2}$):* Utilization of picture books, storytelling media, role-playing props, and locally sourced natural materials reflecting ethnic diversity. The educational efficacy of these materials is realized through cooperative play and peer interaction, fostering communication, sharing, and prosocial engagement (Trawick-Smith et al., 2023).
- *Multilingual Linguistic and Symbolic Environment ($X_{1.3}$):* Integration of the national language (Vietnamese) alongside visual symbols, pictorial signs, and local ethnic languages where appropriate, supporting children's access, participation, and cultural identity expression (UNESCO, 2006).

1.1.2. Socio-Emotional Environment and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (X_2)

- *Culturally Responsive Teacher Competence ($X_{2.1}$):* Teacher understanding of children's cultural, linguistic, and family backgrounds; respectful attitudes free from prejudice; and the ability to select content, media, and methods tailored to children's ethnolinguistic profiles.

- *Equitable, Inclusive Interaction and Emotional Safety* ($X_{2.2}$): Cultivation of positive teacher-child and child-child relationships; provision of equal opportunities for participation; encouragement of peer sharing and collaboration; and mitigation of exclusionary or marginalizing behaviors. This component is paramount in providing authentic practice grounds for social skill acquisition (Keles et al., 2024; Khalfaoui et al., 2021).
- *School–Family–Community Partnerships* ($X_{2.3}$): Mobilization of parents and community elders/artisans to share cultural knowledge, oral traditions, indigenous crafts, folk games, and communal values. This collaboration bridges home, school, and community experiences (mesosystemic alignment) while expanding children's social engagement opportunities (Keles et al., 2024; NAEYC, 2019).

In summary, X_1 establishes the foundational resources and exposure to cultural diversity, whereas X_2 activates meaningful participation, interaction, and experiential learning. These two dimensions are hypothesized to directly influence the social skill development of 5–6-year-old children through opportunities for communication, play, collaboration, and social inclusion.

1.2. Structure of Social Skills in 5–6-Year-Old Children within a Multicultural Context

Social Skills in 5–6-year-old children denote the capacity to deploy socially appropriate behaviors to communicate, initiate and sustain positive relationships, cooperate with peers, and constructively resolve interpersonal situations. In multicultural settings, these skills must be examined in light of linguistic and cultural diversity. Adapted to the study's contextual parameters, four core dimensions of Social Skills (Y) are proposed:

- **Social Communication Skills (Y_1):** Ability to listen, articulate needs and perspectives, and utilize appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues to interact with teachers and peers, including situations characterized by linguistic and cultural differences.
- **Cooperation and Sharing Skills (Y_2):** Active participation in small-group activities, sharing materials and ideas, turn-taking, and coordinating efforts to complete collective tasks.
- **Relationship Initiation and Maintenance Skills (Y_3):** Ability to make friends, join ongoing peer play, demonstrate empathy and respect, and accept cultural and linguistic differences among peers.
- **Problem-Solving and Social Conflict Resolution Skills (Y_4):** Ability to identify interpersonal problems, express needs constructively, negotiate, seek mutually acceptable solutions, and resolve peer disagreements without aggression. NAEYC emphasizes creating structured opportunities for children to negotiate and problem-solve in social scenarios.

2. Theoretical Impact Matrix and Proposed Research Model

2.1. Relationship Matrix Between MEE Characteristics and Social Skill Indicators

Anchored in Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978), child social skill development occurs through dynamic, reciprocal interactions within their immediate environment (Microsystem). Table 1 operationalizes these theoretical channels supported by empirical literature.

Table 1: Theoretical Impact Matrix Between MEE Characteristics and Social Skill Indicators in 5-6 Year-Old Children

MEE Components	Detailed Attributes	Target Social Skill Dimension (Y)	Underlying Mechanism & Supporting Empirical Literature
Physical Environment (X_1)	Cultural Space & Activity Corners ($X_{1.1}$) Diverse Materials & Toys ($X_{1.2}$)	Cooperation & Sharing (Y_2); Relationship Initiation & Maintenance (Y_3)	Establishes a familiar anchor, reducing transition anxiety from home to school; stimulates joint play and resource sharing around ethnic materials.
	Multilingual Linguistic & Symbolic Environment ($X_{1.3}$)	Social Communication (Y_1)	Expands bilingual vocabulary, facilitates symbolic decoding, and stimulates peer verbal exchange across different mother-tongue groups.
Socio-Emotional Environment (X_2)	Culturally Responsive Teacher Competence ($X_{2.1}$)	Social Problem-Solving & Conflict Resolution (Y_1); Social Communication (Y_3)	Teachers model equitable and respectful behaviors; deployment of scaffolding language helps de-escalate anxiety and resolve language-driven misunderstandings.
	Inclusive & Emotionally Safe Peer Interactions ($X_{2.2}$)	Cooperation & Sharing (Y_2); Social Problem-Solving & Conflict Resolution (Y_4)	Fosters emotional safety, builds tolerance, and mitigates ingroup/outgroup bias and prejudice.

MEE Components	Detailed Attributes	Target Social Skill Dimension (Y)	Underlying Mechanism & Supporting Empirical Literature
	School–Family–Community Partnerships (X _{2.3})	Relationship Initiation & Maintenance (Y ₃); Social Communication (Y ₁)	Aligns home and school micro-environments (mesosystem), reinforces cultural pride, and enhances children's self-confidence in social self-expression

2.2. Proposed Theoretical Impact Model

The conceptual model posits that children's social skills (Y) are directly and indirectly influenced by the structural components of the Multicultural Educational Environment (MEE). The physical environment (X₁) provides essential spatial and material conditions, whereas the socio-emotional environment (X₂) - particularly culturally responsive teacher competence (X_{2.1}) and inclusive peer climate (X₂) serves as a critical driver that transforms environmental resources into meaningful social experiences.

The conceptual relationship is specified as follows:

$$Y = f(X_{1.1}, X_{1.2}, X_{1.3}, X_{2.1}, X_{2.2}, X_{2.3}) + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- Y: Social skills of 5–6-year-old children;
- X_{1.1}, X_{1.2},...: Constituent dimensions of the Multicultural Educational Environment;
- ε: Unobserved error term representing exogenous factors outside the model (e.g., family background, innate child temperament, community environment).

3. Proposed System of Theoretical and Practical Solutions

Consistent with findings by Gay (2010), Banks and Banks (2019), and Leung and Hue (2017), implementing culturally responsive pedagogy is vital for nurturing social competence among minority children. In Northern Vietnam, MEE implementation must transition from policy intent into concrete pedagogical actions (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). Four directional solution sets are proposed:

- *Designing Open and Welcoming Multicultural Spaces*: Preschools should proactively enrich physical environments by establishing experiential "Indigenous Cultural Corners" and "Miniature Heritage Museums" featuring authentic local artifacts. Storybooks in bilingual formats and interactive learning tools in local ethnic languages should be prioritized alongside community-contributed materials.
- *Innovating Pedagogical Practices via Culturally Responsive Teaching*: Transition from teacher-directed instruction to active, project-based learning (e.g., projects titled "Our Ethnic Costumes" or "Community Festivals"), dramatic play, and social role-playing. Folk songs, rhymes, and traditional games from the Tay, Nung, H'Mong, and Thai ethnic groups should be integrated into daily learning schedules to encourage cooperative problem-solving.
- *Enhancing Multicultural Competencies for Preschool Teachers*: Mountainous area educators require continuous professional development focusing on intercultural communication, unconscious bias awareness, dual-language scaffolding, and local community engagement. Cultivating empathy and unconditional respect for cultural diversity is essential.
- *Institutionalizing School–Family–Community Collaboration*: Flexible partnership mechanisms tailored to parents' livelihood schedules and native languages must be established. Inviting parents and local artisans into classrooms as "cultural knowledge bearers" elevates the social standing of ethnic minority families, instills child cultural pride, and strengthens the home-school mesosystem.

IV. Conclusion

Based on a theoretical review of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and early childhood social development, this paper proposes a theoretical framework linking multicultural educational environment characteristics to the social skills of 5–6-year-old children in Vietnam's Northern Midlands and Mountainous region. MEE is conceptualized through physical conditions, pedagogical practices, interactive climate, and community-family partnerships, while social skills are captured through communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, and group adaptation.

The theoretical analysis demonstrates that respecting cultural diversity, organizing linguistically responsive activities, and providing equal interaction opportunities serve as key determinants in developing children's prosocial competencies. While this conceptual model provides a robust foundation for pedagogical planning, it remains theoretically derived and awaits empirical validation. Future studies should construct standardized measurement scales and collect empirical survey and observational data across diverse socio-economic and cultural settings to test model fit and estimate path coefficients.

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