

# University Educators' Perceptions on Minority Education - Examples from Chinese Higher Education

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**Abstract** Chinese university educators' perceptions of minority education (Minzu education) are examined in this paper. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and questionnaires were conducted with twenty-two educators who work with minority education from nine universities in China. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data presented in this paper. How university educators conceptualize Minzu (minority) and reflect on minority education are examined. Three trends of views are identified: the Minzu-neutral, the Minzu-oriented, and the culturalism. Educators with different ethnic views have distinct ways of conceptualizing Minzu and reflecting on minority education. Concerning the reflections on students' academic performance, educators taking the Minzu-neutral perspective place more importance on the students' birthplace and social class than their Minzu. However, Minzu and culture are considered the main reasons for minority students' poor academic performance by educators taking the Minzu-oriented and the culturalism views. Furthermore, although various strategies are adopted by educators with different views, most of the educators in this study lower the academic requirements for minority students intentionally or unintentionally for the purpose of pursuing educational equality. Preferential policies for the ethnic minorities are supported by most participants despite the view difference. Additionally, educators' views on Minzu and minority education are not static, but fluid and negotiated in a range of contexts.

**Keywords:** university educator, minority education, Minzu, diversity perception, qualitative content analysis

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## 1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural country with 56 officially recognized Minzu. According to the Seventh National Population Census of the People's Republic of China published in 2020, the total population of China is 1.4 billion and Han people account for 91.1% of the total population. The other 55 Minzus account for 8.9% of the total population. The population sizes of these ethnic groups vary from 1.2 billion (Han) to around 3,000 people (Luo ba) [1]. Further, minority Minzus are not homogenous, there are diversities within groups. For instance, over 120 languages are used by 55 minority Minzus [2,3]. Additionally, officially recognized ethnic autonomous areas account for about 64% of China's territory. Therefore, the 55 officially recognized non-Han groups, play an important role in economic development, social harmony and national unity, and education for the minority is one of the major concerns of research in China [4,5]. The Chinese term Minzu is often translated into ethnicity, nation or nationality. Minzu is preferred in this paper as the English words tend to connote extra layers of politico-economic meanings that do not seem to fit the Chinese context [6].

Research on Chinese minority education is mostly viewed through the lens of multicultural education. The idea of multicultural education was introduced in China in the 1980s and has been used as an important lens in research about Chinese minority education since 2000 [7,8]. Minzu has remained a dominant concern due to the link between diversity and educational equity, and also the interdependence of Minzu and national unity [9,10]. Chinese minority education focuses on national unity, the coexistence of national identity and Minzu identity, minority cultural revival, and educational equity [9]. According to previous research, multicultural curricula which takes gender, Minzu, religious and social class differences into account are considered the most significant way of promoting Chinese minority education [9,11]. Furthermore, research on the influence of language policies and language education in minority contexts has shown that multilingual education promotes minority students' Minzu identities, intercultural competence, and academic achievement [5,9,12].

The role of teacher education in achieving equitable pedagogy has also been researched. Teachers are expected to display cultural sensitivity, taking students' cultural backgrounds into consideration in teaching, which would lead to positive psychological, academic, and health outcomes for the students [9,13]. In this paper university educators refer to people who provide instruction or

education at a university. University teachers, master/doctoral student supervisors and student mentors/ college counselors are all seen as educators. University educators play a unique and important role in schools and the student-educator relationship can be critical for students' academic success [14]. Further, educators' perceptions are significant in terms of influencing educators' educational practice and institutionalized activities. Educators' perceptions have both cognitive, emotive and social functions as part of both the socio-cognitive interface between social structures and of educators' pedagogical practices. Educators' views organize and ground the social representations shared by educator groups. Also, educators' attitudes impact educators how they organize and coordinate their actions in practice [15]. Thus, the educators' perceptions are crucial in promoting students' academic performance and in helping to prepare students for a culturally diverse society [16].

Research indicates that the Chinese Minzu ideology, which has significant influence on educators' viewpoints on minority education, is a blend of Confucianism, Marxist Minzu ideology and multiculturalism [17,18]. The Confucian idea of great unity and cultural assimilation suggests China as the center of civilization, with the Chinese Han culture being inclusive and paternalist to the neighboring cultures [17,19]. Also, the Confucian principle of 'harmony with differences' (he er butong) hopes for minimizing conflicts between the Han Minzu and minority Minzus as well as facilitating national unity [17,19]. In addition, the national discourse about Minzu issues is impacted by both the Marxist ideology and Soviet practices, such as Minzu identification and registration [18]. The Minzu ideology has also been influenced by western ideas of multiculturalism since the 1980s. Multicultural education practices in the US, Canada, and Australia as well as Banks' theory of multicultural education, have been scrutinized in the context of Chinese multicultural education [7,10]. For instance, the concept of 'multicultural education' has been localized by some researchers that 'integrated multicultural education' has been proposed to emphasize on national integration and political stability [9,20].

This research advances a nuanced understanding of the impact of educators' attitude for pedagogical actions and social relations [14,15,16]. So far, the voices of Chinese educators with regard to minority education have received little attention in English or Chinese research. This empirically oriented study aims to shed new light on educators' ideas of conceptualizing and reflecting on minority education and to provide useful insights for education practitioners and policymakers. The analytical framework of the study is based on three commonly researched diversity ideologies: color-blindness, multiculturalism and culturalism [21-32]. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do Chinese university educators conceptualize Minzu and minority education?
- 2) How do Chinese university educators reflect on minority education?

## 2. Theoretical Framing

International research on educators' perceptions of minority or migrant education reveal three main views.

First, research shows that many educators consider themselves race-neutral or color-blind, which means in practice that they emphasize similarities across groups of people or uniqueness of every student and minimize the use and significance of racial group membership [22,23,24,29,30]. Research also indicates that a race-neutral/color-blind approach contributes to fighting against prejudices and to promoting social inclusion. Yet, at the same time it blinds educators to recognize racial differences and discrimination, which in turn leads to increased self-segregation of groups and decreased sensitivity to racism [24,29]. Moreover, a race-neutral/color-blind perspective tends to accept and maintain the identity of the dominant group, further legitimizing inequalities between the majority group and the minority groups [24].

In terms of educators' practice, research suggests that educators with more color-blind orientations were less willing to adapt their teaching to minority students' needs or adopt inclusive teaching strategies [33,34]. Positive correlation was indicated between color-blind attitudes and opposition towards preferential policies for minority groups as an approach to achieving equality and equity [35]. The dominant groups more commonly favor the race-neutral/color-blind view as a way to appear unbiased, while minority groups prefer the multicultural view [27,29,36].

Second, the multicultural strategy advocates the racialization of migrant and minority students and sees respecting and valuing group membership as an efficient way of pursuing diversity and equality [28,30]. In addition, exposure to a multicultural passage decreases implicit and explicit prejudice comparing to color blindness [37]. Educators who endorse multicultural strategy are more willing to adapt their teaching to ethnic/racial minority students and adopt inclusive teaching practices [33,34]. Nevertheless, the multicultural view can easily lead to more stereotyping that different groups are regarded as homogeneous groups, meaning that they are defined and valued according to certain characteristics and prejudiced stereotyping [25,26]. Moreover, it ignores the importance of relationships and interaction, and most importantly the power discrepancies [38,39].

Third, different from race-neutral/ color-blind and multicultural views that both target at promoting positive intergroup relations and equality, the culturalism approach sees culture as an organizing force in human affairs and social phenomena. Educators ascribing to a culturalism view believe that culture shapes students' views of the world and thinking, which has a negative influence on intergroup-dynamics [31,32]. Furthermore, research illustrates that three diversity ideologies are not static that people hold several ideologies to some degree [27,30].

In the Chinese context, the framework of 'cultural pluralism with political unity' suggested by Fei, is the most important diversity model in China and has significant influence on university educators' perceptions on minority education [4,40]. According to the 'cultural pluralism with political Unity' framework, both the Han and 55 Minzus are essential parts of China, but there are political and cultural distinctions between groups. Moreover, such a configuration is often dynamic rather than static [41]. Thus, the 'cultural pluralism with political

unity' framework represents an expansion of Chinese identity at the national level while promoting the plural Minzu identities, which were officially recognized.

**Table 1. Information about the three targeted universities and interviewees**

Target university	Interviewees	Working language(s)
University i (Finance-and economics-oriented university)	Interviewee C (Female, Han, English teacher), Interviewee E (Female, Han, English teacher), Interviewee G (Female, Han, English teacher), Interviewee H (Female, Han, English teacher)	Mandarin, English
University ii (Comprehensive university)	Interviewee D (Female, Han, Dean of School of Minzu Education), Interviewee F (Female, Han, Professor in education)	Mandarin, English
University iii (Minzu university)	Interviewee A (Male, Han, Student mentor, coordinator for bachelor program, lecturer), Interviewee B (Male, Han, Professor in history)	Mandarin, German

The framework is a good example of the mixed Chinese Minzu ideology which provides a reflection of Confucian traditions, Marxist Minzu ideology and multicultural ideas [41,42]. Further, the term of community of Chinese Nation, which refers to not only citizens with Chinese nationality but also shared historical and cultural community, was first officially used in 2014 [43,44]. After 2017, the community of Chinese Nation has become the focus of Minzu research. The theory of cultural pluralism with political unity is the basis and structural premise of the sense of community for the Chinese nation. The key to forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation is to achieve a good balance between pluralism and unity. Meanwhile, the common characteristics and interests should be strengthened in the exchange of different Minzu groups [45,46]. The Minzu unity and commonality are emphasized in university teaching and learning, which has influence on educators' views on minority education.

Research about minority education and teachers' perceptions in China relies more on theoretical and conceptual arguments than empirical study [10]. Moreover, educators' views on minority education in Chinese context are under-researched. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to examine Chinese minority education and Chinese educators' perceptions. More diversity models in addition to 'cultural pluralism with political unity' are needed to explore Chinese educators' perceptions. This study illustrates through the sample of interviewed participants, how Chinese university educators perceive and reflect on minority education. Three diversity ideologies (color-blind, multiculturalism and culturalism) provide new approaches to examine Chinese educators' views on minority education.

### 3. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. The data presented in this paper were collected at three Chinese universities

through semi-structured interviews in 2018 and questionnaires in 2022 from educators who have experience of working with minority students for more than two years. The interviews and questionnaires included questions about educators' general views on Minzu as well as about their experiences and practices of working with minority students. Ethical issues were fully considered. This research is based on a Finnish university and the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics defines the scope of ethical review. Informed consents were obtained from all participants before the semi-structured interviews. The length of the interviews varied between 40 and 60 minutes. Six interviews were conducted in Mandarin and two conducted in English. All interviews were recorded. The questionnaires collected in 2022 consisted of open-ended questions such as 'How do you conceptualize Minzu and minority Minzu?' 'Do you think academic standards should be lowered for ethnic minority students?' and 'How do you think about preferential policies?'. All questionnaire answers were in Mandarin. Further, all Mandarin interviews and questionnaires were transcribed in Mandarin and the transcriptions were then translated into English by the researcher. All Mandarin and English transcriptions were examined by a Mandarin speaking researcher to enhance the credibility of the data [47,48].

#### 3.1. Demographics of Interviewees

Eight university educators from three universities in three regions of China were interviewed in 2018. The sample included educators from both Minzu university (which mainly enroll ethnic minority students) and mainstream universities (which enroll both Han and minority students). Taking regional and principal differences into account, the three types of universities were located in three cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Changchun). The three universities were selected to provide a more nuanced perspective on university educators' views of minority education.

Fourteen questionnaires were collected from university educators in 2022. The fourteen university educators (6= male, 8= female) were from seven universities based in seven cities Changchun (Jilin province), Shijiazhuang (Hebei province), Nanning (Qinghai province), Bole (Xinjiang autonomous region), Tongliao (Inner Mongolia), Chengdu (Sichuan province) and Baoji (Shanxi province). Participants' Minzu diversification was also considered in that the respondents came from Han, Mongolian, and Yi Minzus.

Snowball sampling was utilized to select participants in this study [49,50]. The inclusion criteria in the selection of the participants included having extensive experience working with minority students as a university teacher or master/ doctoral student supervisor or student mentor/ college counselor. In Chinese universities, the duties of student mentor or college counselor include consulting, moral education, cultural exchange, career advising, mental health, financial aid, student integration, recreation, day-to-day living, leadership and so on [51,52]. In addition, the working time with minority students should be more than two years. The author knew two of the participants from the conference about Chinese ethnic

minority education and they recommend other colleagues who are eligible to contribute to the study. The interview participants are referred to using the letters from A to H and questionnaire participants I to V. Interview participants' networks of practice, including the universities they were based in and their roles in minority education, are carefully explained (see Table 1).

### 3.2. Qualitative Content Analysis

The interviews and questionnaires in this study have been analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis, which is a systematic method for searching out and describing meanings within qualitative data [53,54,55]. The aim of inductive approach is achieved by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame which contains all the aspects that feature in the description and interpretation of the material [54,56].

A systematic six-step analysis approach was used to ensure precision in the analysis process: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report [57]. Data analysis began with reading the transcribed interviews and questionnaires repeatedly to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the material as a whole and to identify connections within the data. Each transcript was read carefully and the portions that captured key thoughts or concepts were highlighted. Next, the text was approached by making notes of the first thoughts and initial analysis. After working through the transcript, preliminary codes were decided. Once all transcripts had been coded, three main themes emerged. Further, three perceptions in the Chinese context were identified and named as Minzu-neutral, Minzu-oriented, and culturalism perception by the researcher, using a lens influenced by three theory-driven diversity ideologies race-neutral/color-blind, multiculturalism and culturalism. Although the terms like color-blind and race-neutral are mostly used in the west but not in China, they refer to the same thing in practice. Even in China Minzu is used for minorities, in practice the term is equivalent to how the term racial background is used in, for example, the US [21-32]. Note that even though some educators were inclined towards particular view on minority education, they all combined multiple strategies in practice and change perceptions situationally. The categories of three perceptions are italicized when they appear in the text.

In the following part, the three perceptions are discussed throughout the analysis to answer the research questions: how university educators conceptualize Minzu and minority education, how university educators reflect on minority education and teaching strategies used to work with minority students.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Chinese University Educators' Conceptualization of Minzu and Minority Education

In the interviews, Minzu was conceptualized in three ways by the educators. There was a tendency that Minzu

was regarded as a neutral factor in education, which meant in practice that the Minzu membership of their students was ignored. However, Minzu as grounds to make assumptions about and value students' academic performance and behavior was preferred by Minzu-oriented view. Furthermore, culture as the fundamental reason for differences in students' behaviors and competence was represented by culturalism view.

According to participants A, B, D, J, O, P and Q, education for the minority should be Minzu -neutral and colorblind so that minority students should not be judged or treated differently based on their Minzu. Interviewees A and B from the Minzu university and Interviewee D, a senior management representative at the faculty level from the comprehensive university, all had extensive contact with minority students in their roles as lecturers, coordinators, and student mentors. In trying to define Minzu and minority education, it was emphasized repeatedly that minority students and Han students are the same and should be treated the same. In addition, university P, from Mognolian Minzu, also claimed the same idea.

*For me, students from minority Minzus and Han students are the same, and I will provide different guidance to students according to their academic background, not just Minzu status* (Educator P).

Theoretical knowledge were also provided to support this argument:

*Firstly, the minority Minzus and Han Minzu should be the same, right? Do not infinitely exaggerate the characteristics of the Han and the minorities..... Moreover, according to Engels's view, the Han can also be divided into multiple Minzus. Even between the Han there are big differences including language barriers. So Commonalities come before the distinctions. I have worked in this Minzu university for years and I feel that the key point is not to exaggerate the differences between groups. After all, it's 'Harmony in diversity'. .....and it is entirely feasible in China* (Interviewee B).

Interviewee B's perception reflects the Chinese Minzu ideology which is formed after adoption, appropriation, and modification of a plethora of often conflicting ideologies. The Chinese Minzu ideology is a hybrid of Confucian paternalism, Marxist ethnic ideology and liberal multiculturalism [17,18]. First, the ethnic ideology is driven by the deep-rooted Confucian ideal of great unity and principle of cultural diffusion, which indicates that the minority acculturation should be promoted and eventually assimilated into Han society [58]. In addition, the Confucian value of 'family/household' (jia) suggests all Minzus as a big family and Han as the big brother with the commission helping other brother Minzus [17,18,53]. Therefore, 'harmony in diversity' is a reflection of the Confucian principle of dealing with Minzu relations. Second, Marxist ethnic ideology which was founded by Marx and Engels in the middle of the 19th century and spread to China in the early 20th century, has a significant impact on Chinese Minzu ideology and policy [17,59]. The first generation Minzu policy, which was mainly appropriated from the Soviet Union, was implemented between 1949 and the 2000s. The Minzu recognition campaign was adopted by the government to identify and

register Minzu according to language, religion, economic life and culture. Additionally, the system of regional Minzu autonomy has been adopted since 1947 [18]. However, in the Chinese context, the Soviet Minzu model was modified to a blended, paternalistic, and reciprocal Minzu model under the socialist state, while denying the minority Minzu's right of pursuing their own independence [18]. Interviewee B recognized the political and cultural ethnic difference, but focused more on similarities of all ethnic groups, which is an important color-blind strategy [60].

Contrarily, most of the educators (14 out of 22) tended to make assumptions about students and treated them differently according to their Minzu status. They divided people into groups and valued them according to their membership in these groups. This becomes apparent in the Chinese context, where the Minzu classification is officially conducted by the government and the Minzu is showed on everyone's ID card [4,18]. The educators who appeared to be Minzu-oriented in this study were mostly Chinese teachers of English, assistant/associate professors in education and political sciences. Additionally, most of the contact with minority students happened in classes.

Their definition of Minzu was more concrete in that 'minority Minzu' meant 'Chinese people other than the Han', 'people who have different languages, cultures and religions from the Han, but all Chinese', 'people from Xinjiang province and Tibet or Sichuan or Gansu or Inner Mongolia'. Educator S also mentioned the diversities within minority Minzu groups.

*Minority student groups vary greatly in terms of the degree of integration into mainstream society. The integration of Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tibetans is not enough, but other Minzus are not much different from the Han (Educator S).*

Further, their image of minority students was characterized by descriptions including 'lower academic performance', 'poor learning attitude', 'active', and 'a little mysterious'. The interviewees do not only give a mere description of 'the other', but also suggest the norm as 'majority Han', 'people living inland', 'higher academic ability' and 'not lively', which is a form of cultural essentialism. In this case, 'curious' suggests an exoticization of 'others' [61].

Interestingly, although A and B tended to endorse the Minzu-neutral view, in practice they often adopted the Minzu-oriented strategies:

*.....For example, last semester, I taught two Kazak language classes. One class was composed of Han students who had no knowledge of Kazak language and the other was made up of Kazak students who could speak fluent Kazak and they came to learn about Kazak culture. Thus, these two classes were different. I felt that two classes have different styles and study experiences. For instance, Han students still prefer the traditional ways of language teaching, but I felt that Kazakh students were more likely to have interactions and communications. They are more enthusiastic about the class. Therefore, in addition to academic achievement, I need to take care of their psychological and emotional feeling in daily life and classes' (Interviewee A).*

When the participants tried to identify the reason for the difference, the word 'culture' appeared. They thought that

the differences were due to cultures and customs, which are regarded as the main differences between Minzu in China [59]. Additionally, three interviewees A(Han), T(Han) and R(Yi) mentioned that minority students need extra attention and support.

*Minority students mean "minority of majority" and face more challenges in their studies and lives. They need more material and emotional support (Educator R).*

The idea that minority students' psychological and emotional feelings need more attention implies that minority students are more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable than Han students. Minority students are taken care of and patronized compared with Han students, and this perception points towards the power relationship between university educators, Han students and minority students [62,63].

Furthermore, the culturalism view, which tends towards othering by imposing cultural elements as explanations for people's behaviors, encounters and opinions, also emerged in the data analysis [32,64]. Interviewee F had contact with minority students through teaching bachelor students and supervising master students. She suggested that minority students were regarded as incompetent compared to Han students in terms of language and way of thinking.

*Minority students and Han students are different in terms of their way of thinking. I think language influences the way of thinking significantly and ethnic minority students who have gaps in their way of thinking also have problems in Mandarin. They can understand Mandarin superficially but not deeply (Interviewee F).*

How Interviewee F conceptualized Minzu was consistent with research stipulating that Chinese academic discourses sometimes define minority groups and their cultures negatively. Minority Minzus have been constructed as less valuable in culture compared with mainstream Han culture, which is a racist assumption based on stereotypes about the intelligence of non-Han people [57]. It is noteworthy that minority groups are not considered homogenous but that some minority Minzus are considered 'the majority', for instance the Man Minzu and Korean Minzu. This phenomenon hints at the existence of a particular hierarchy specific of the minority Minzus from the majority's perspective. Specifically, Chinese Koreans have been officially portrayed as a 'model minority' with a higher level of educational, demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic accomplishments [65,66]. 'Model minority' generates controversy in terms of oversimplifying the experiences and achievements of students from 'model minority groups' by ignoring areas of inequality and disadvantage. In reality, minority groups are much more diverse and complex groups than is usually assumed and the image of 'model minority' enables the education system to sustain its claim to fairness and impartiality and, in particular, to reject accusations of discrimination [66].

## 4.2. Chinese university Educators' Reflections on Minority Education

This section presents how the three different perspectives on minority education in China are reflected in the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees. The Minzu-neutral, Minzu-oriented and culturalism views

have divergent but interconnected reflections in terms of minority students' academic performance, ways of advancing minority education, and preferential policies. Minority students are constrained by prejudices and discrimination in society based on intersectional factors such as Minzu, social class, birthplace, gender, language and other factors [67,68]. University educators should maintain a reflective critique of specific ethnic and cultural practices at all times [67].

#### 4.2.1. Academic Performance

Concerning the academic performance of minority students, the Minzu-neutral perception indicated that all college students are the same and that the difficulties they face in their study have nothing to do with their Minzu. According to the interviews, it was challenging for educators in terms of both teaching and management. As reported by Interviewee D, who is the dean of a School of Minzu Education (SME) which provides preparatory classes for minority students, educators face dilemmas between academic requirements and reality, and therefore have to negotiate between policy and students' real situations:

*..... But the biggest challenge is the minority students' academic performance. Firstly, they have weak knowledge foundation. Secondly, most of them are not motivated as they study here for only one year and can graduate once pass all exams. It's a headache. So later we decided to revise the composition of exam results at faculty level, such as ..... But this has caused a great deal of trouble in our management, that is, we have to be fair and reasonable, and our regulations have to be particularly meticulous..... (Interviewee D).*

According to the dean, the Minzu-neutral strategy is adopted in educational management that teachers 'have to be fair and reasonable'. According to the preliminary survey in this SME, minority students who study here are from 31 Minzu origins and speaking 22 languages as mother tongues [69]. Thus, there is no 'special Minzu' in SEM. However, minority students' relatively poor academic performance is only attributed to 'weak knowledge foundation' and 'lack of motivation'. Minzu and linguistic diversity is not taken into account when discussing minority students' educational attainment. The fact that many minority students speak Mandarin as a second language, but the teaching and testing language in SEM is Mandarin is neglected.

Contrarily, from a Minzu-oriented perspective, Minzu largely indicated students' academic performance:

*..... In our university, an English proficiency test is taken once students enter the university. Students are divided into A, B, C, and D levels, with D being the lowest..... However, most of the minority students from Xinjiang and Tibet are at level D (Interviewee C).*

The data collected in 2022 indicates that minority students' relatively poor academic performance is attributed to a 'language barrier' and 'learning attitude'. The importance of linguistic background is emphasized more compared with the data collected in 2018. However, the significance of showing interest in the social and economic backgrounds of students are still neglected. According to research, students' English academic performance is associated with students' social class and

mother language [70]. The teaching language of university English classes in Chinese universities is English and Mandarin which means minority students who speak other languages as mother tongue take exams in their third language.

From the viewpoint of the culturalism view, the minority student's language and way of thinking explained their academic performance:

*Minority students are far less well developed compared with Han students in terms of language and way of thinking. And I think this is the main reason for minority students' poor academic achievement (Interviewee F).*

Educator F's thought was also an ensemble of intellectual orientations that crystallized methodologically around the reduction of social and historical questions to abstract questions of culture [32,64].

#### 4.2.2. Factors to Promote Minority Education

In the interviews and questionnaires, educators were asked to reflect on minority education based on their working experience. Participants with different positions in minority education have different reflections on how to improve Chinese minority education. All reflections were classified into three levels: government, institutional and personal levels, and complemented with examples from the data (see Table 2).

As stated in Table 2, preferential educational policies that adopted by the government are supported by most of the educators in this research due to the value of educational equality and equity. The critical reflection on the preferential policies for minority students was also made ('equal results for all'). Actually, preferential policies for specific groups in education have been heated discussed in China for years. Reverse discrimination is the most significant counterargument, with claims that the favoring of some specific groups may disadvantage the majority group. Moreover, preferential policies have also been criticized for no longer being effective in promoting social equality and multicultural education in China [62,71]. Research also confirms that the current implementation of preferential policies is no longer in accord with the original intent of the policy. The use of Minzu identity as the sole criterion for educational preferences creates a blunt and ineffective tool for increasing educational equality. Factors like birthplace and social class should also be taken into account in preferential policies [63,71].

As the Institutional level indicated in Table 2, the significance of mixing with different Minzus to expand all students' worldviews and reduce discrimination against minority students is emphasized. Interestingly, inclusion was articulated as a strategy to fight against discrimination but not as a means to reduce the achievement gaps. Furthermore, encouraging students' learning through flexible scores and helping minority students find a position in the society after graduation are also highlighted. Further, a parallel higher education system for minority students is suggested, since that China only has the parallel bilingual/ trilingual basic education in five Minzu autonomous provinces [72]. However, the parallel education system can also exclude minority students as 'the other' by erecting strong boundaries, and could create special institutions in which minority students are kept in

isolation. In establishing this ‘self’ versus ‘the other’ dichotomy, the participants would contribute to creating ideological ethnocentrism, which can give an impression of superiority [61,64]. According to the data collected in 2022, ‘improve educational resources, especially teacher resources in minority areas’ and ‘strengthen the teaching and learning of Mandarin’ are the most frequently mentioned methods to promote minority education. At the individual educator level, ‘equality’ and ‘respect’ are the most frequently mentioned. Moreover, ‘tolerance’ ‘care’ and ‘lower academic standard’ are stressed with good intention, but it can also place the tag of “insufficient ability” on minority students and influence both how they view their own position in society and how others perceive them [62,73].

**4.2.3. Teaching Strategies with Minority Education**

Educators with different views have different reflections on strategies used in teaching with minority students, which is also consistent with the personal reflection in Table 2. First, those who adhered to the Minzu-neutral perspective tried to eliminate the boundary between the Han and minority students, and also between various other minority groups. Thus, the belief of ‘people live in harmony and appreciate each other’ (meimei yugong), which was introduced by Fei in 1990 was favored. ‘Meimei yugong’ also mirrors the concept of cultural consciousness meaning that people living in a certain culture having self-knowledge of their culture and understanding of its origin, history, characteristics and trends, which plays a vital role in educators’ beliefs about working with minority students [74,75]. Furthermore, ‘suit the teaching to the ability of the pupils’ and ‘being patient and tolerant’ were implied as rules for working with

minority students. It is essential for educators to take responsibility for being sensitive towards pupils’ cultural background, and to act to enhance equality and the feeling of belonging for every student [75].

Second, educators with the Minzu-oriented perception saw ‘giving everyone an equal opportunity and being supportive’ and ‘attention and care’ as the rule for teaching in class. The strategy may be due to the fact that minority students were treated as both the ‘one of us’ and ‘the other’ in relation to Han students. As stated by participants, although minority students are different from Han students, they live and study in the same political and educational system which leads to similarities.

Another example of the dynamic and complex othering process among the different Minzus at higher education is that the educators took varying approaches towards students and teachers when talking about Minzu identity.

*We basically don't talk about the topic of Minzu with colleagues which I think it is a sign of inclusivity. We try to avoid giving people the idea that I'm discriminating against you or dividing you, so we don't discuss this topic..... (Interviewee H).*

The way of working with the minorities is not static but shifts according to the status of people. On the one hand, Minzu is regarded as a significant criterion for minority students in terms of academic performance. On the other hand, the same participants tried to downplay Minzu when talking with colleagues, which can be considered Minzu-neutral. Commonality is emphasized in this discourse which can relate to warmth [76]. The silence on Minzu towards colleagues contributes to avoiding discussions of ethnic differences and discrimination, which in turn also leads to greater silence on power relations and invisible discrimination [21,22,23,24].

**Table 2. University educators’ reflections on minority education**

Role in ME	Government level	Institutional level	Personal level
Professor of history	<b>Basic education:</b> ‘The current situation of Chinese education is like ‘castles in the air’, where the top priority is always higher education instead of basic education.’	<b>Educational Scores:</b> ‘Educators have to positively encourage minority students if they work hard and make some improvements’	<b>Meimei Yugong:</b> ‘People live in harmony and appreciate each other’ <b>Tolerance:</b> ‘Be tolerate with students who don’t speak Mandarin as mother tongue’
Coordinator, student mentor	<b>Educational equity:</b> ‘Not only individual minority students, but also minority areas, could benefit from PP’	<b>Recruit and employment:</b> ‘If students get good jobs after graduation, it is success for universities’	<b>Distance:</b> ‘Most of the contacts with minority students are from work’ <b>With extra caution:</b> ‘Work with minority students with greater caution to keep national unity’
English teacher	<b>Fairness and Equality :</b> ‘PP should be adopted to minority students. Otherwise, they will not be able to enter a good university leading to unfair phenomenon in higher education’	<b>Minzu mixed class:</b> ‘It’s discrimination if there are separate classes for minority students’ <b>Teacher training:</b> ‘Teachers form China don’t have experience about how to deal with minority students. But it is difficult’	<b>Attention and care:</b> ‘Give more attention and care to them.’ <b>Learning:</b> ‘Learning their language will be good’ <b>Two academic standards:</b> ‘For testing I use two judges. Otherwise they will fail.’
Associate/professor of education /political sciences	<b>Quality educational resources:</b> ‘Minority students should have access to better educational resources, especially teacher resources.’ <b>Strengthen The teaching of Mandarin:</b> ‘Strengthen the teaching of Mandarin to promote the communication between different Minzus	<b>A parallel higher education system:</b> ‘It might be better if Han and minority students can receive higher education in different educational systems’	<b>Lower academic standards:</b> ‘Not on purpose. But I actually lower academic standards for minority students in my class’ <b>Equality and Respect:</b> ‘All Minzus in China should be like the seeds of a pomegranate that stick together. We should respect every Minzu’

\* ME=Minority Education PP=Preferential Policies.

Third, based on the concept of Minzu constructed within the culturalism view, being tolerant and setting lower standards was indicated the way to teach with minority students in education. What is noteworthy is that gaps between educators' perspectives exist no matter what diversity perceptions they endorse. Besides, all interviewed educators mentioned 'tolerance', 'patience', 'take care' and 'educational equality' in relation to minority education. In practice, they all lowered the academic requirements for minority students, on purpose or not, even they were aware that teaching should be individualized rather than reducing academic standards. This implies that the Minzu differences are understood in terms of the majority learning to tolerate and minorities learning to improve their educational attainment in mainstream education [16,77]. It also indicated that these university educators lack a critical perspective on their own teaching and the higher education system.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This analysis of educators' discourses aims to manifest university educators' different perceptions on minority education in the Chinese context. The data analysis favors the conclusion that three shifting and interconnected perceptions of minority education emerged: Minzu-neutral, Minzu-oriented, and culturalism, which echoes what has been discussed in the theoretical base.

Most educators in this research favor the Minzu-oriented perspective meaning that they racialize minority students and adopt multicultural strategies to promote minority students' academic achievement and inclusion. The Minzu-oriented view is problematic since it can contribute to further stereotyping of some groups [30]. The Minzu-neutral view which emphasizes similarities of all Minzus and uniqueness of individuals is endorsed by seven of the interviewees. The Minzu-neutral perspective contributes to inter-group relations, but it also leads educators to ignore discrimination and unbalanced power relations [24,30]. Chinese educators guided by this view try to promote equality and inclusion in education through cultural consciousness (meimei yugong). On the one hand, the commonality of both Han and minority students, and the uniqueness of all individuals is recognized. On the other hand, Minzu identities could receive recognition through efforts to challenge stereotypes and existing marginalization.

The culturalism orientation is not common in the data as only one educator seemed to rely on the culturalism ethnic view. It is based on ideas of culture shaping people's thinking and behavior. Minority students were more likely to be expressed deficit in terms of their way of thinking and language according to the culturalism view. However, although the three views towards minority education were identified, according to the educators' reflections, they tended to combine various teaching strategies in practice and keep their view fluid and negotiated with respect to different contexts. The gap between educators' perspectives and practices exists no matter what ethnic perceptions they endorse.

There is no substantial difference between the data collected in 2018 and 2022 in terms of three identified perspectives. However, educators in 2022 mentioned more

about promoting the commonalities between Han and minority Minzus instead of celebrating cultural and language pluralism. One limitation of this research is the sample size. Naturally, eight interviews and fourteen questionnaires are not enough to generalize about Chinese educators' perceptions of minority education. However, the voices of the educators serve as illustrations providing a baseline for tracking educators' views towards Minzu and minority education and what pedagogical actions are suitable.

This research offers implications for minority education in and beyond China. First, the research findings provide an opportunity for other educators who work with minority education to examine their own prejudiced attitudes, which they might not always be aware of. In addition, listening to the educators' voices about their own experiences and reflections of Chinese minority education can enrich the way minority education is discussed. The results indicate that educators who work with minority education need a critical understanding of diversity as well as self-awareness about their prejudiced attitudes in their pedagogical practices with situational variation and flexibility.

As reflected in the teachers' talk about their teaching strategies, minority students continue to be minoritized through schooling in China. It may be beneficial that educators be made sufficiently aware of the potential effects of the sociopolitical context on educator attitudes, expectations, and the academic achievement of students [78]. The educational equality and social inclusion could be promoted by educators through including diverse knowledge in the classroom without risking an increase in negative stereotypes and discriminations. In particular, teacher professional development needs to implement critical multicultural coursework and curricula that are more relevant to the social issues faced by educators today [78,79]. Besides, more minority educators and educators from underprivileged background could be encouraged and supported to work in higher education. Future work needs to be devoted to investigating these possibilities of the teacher training programs.

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