

INNOVATING NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY EDUCATION THROUGH PRACTICAL EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

In today's increasingly demanding digital transformation, the future generation of the country needs to be fully and comprehensively developed to meet societal demands. National Defense and Security Education (NDSE) for students should not only aim to provide knowledge about national traditions and the task of protecting the homeland, but also contribute to the formation of character, abilities, life skills, and a sense of social responsibility. Practical experiential activities are a suitable method to help students develop correct understanding and adapt through a vibrant learning environment connected to real-world situations.

Research team studied the innovation in the organization of the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program at the Center for National Defense and Security Education - Thai Nguyen University, focusing on analyzing the shift from an experiential model simulating the military environment to a comprehensive experiential education model. Through document research, analysis of organizational plans, and comparison of program content across different stages, the research team clarified the changes in objectives, content, organizational methods, and educational values.

Keyword: *National defense and security education; practical experience; students; life skills; educational innovation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education and Training (2018) issued the General Education Program – a comprehensive program that strongly shifts from a content-based approach to developing students' qualities and competencies, applied from grade 1 to grade 12 in stages. In addition, experiential learning and career guidance are considered important educational activities aimed at creating opportunities for students to access real-world situations, apply knowledge, develop skills, and improve their adaptability to life. [1]

Given the unique nature of national defense and security education, it requires a combination of awareness and action. Qualities such as discipline, responsibility, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities cannot be developed solely through theoretical learning but must be honed in a practical environment.

Stemming from that need, the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" model of the Center for National Defense and Security Education - Thai Nguyen University was implemented as a unique form of experiential

education, combining a military environment, life skills, traditional education, and community activities.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1. Experiential education in developing students' competencies

According to Dewey, J. (1986), Experiential learning is understood as the process by which learners directly participate in practical activities, thereby forming knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Personal experience is considered to play a crucial role in the learning process because it helps abstract concepts become concrete, relatable, and meaningful to learners. [2] Through participation in practical situations, learners not only acquire knowledge but also form their own understanding, and have a basis for verifying, adjusting, and refining the perceptions formed during the learning process (Kolb, 2014) [3]

According to Circular No. 16/2026/TT-BGDĐT of the Ministry of Education and Training, career

guidance and streaming in education are emphasized in a learner-centered manner, linked to abilities, interests, and the practical needs of society. (Ministry of Education and Training, 2026) [4]. This serves as a guiding principle for educational institutions to innovate experiential learning activities, including national defense and security education, towards developing students' qualities and competencies. Through these perspectives, we can see that the main subject of the activity is the learner (in this case, students at all levels). Through actions and activities, knowledge will gradually be formed. The results of experiential education will be demonstrated through the learner's ability to apply what they learn through those activities .

2.2. Requirements for reforming National Defense and Security education

According to Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW dated August 22, 2025, of the Politburo on breakthroughs in education and training development, the Law on National Defense and Security Education of 2013, and Government Decree No. 139/2020/ND-CP, the reform of National Defense and Security Education is being implemented. These documents provide a legal basis for perfecting the management mechanism, strengthening coordination among agencies, and ensuring the unified, synchronized, and effective implementation of National Defense and Security Education. Current National Defense and Security Education should aim towards: Therefore, the educational approach should focus on educating patriotism, forming civic consciousness, cultivating discipline, developing response skills, and building a spirit of cooperation. [5].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Documentary research method

The authors used a research method involving the analysis of secondary documents, including texts, policies, and resolutions of the Politburo and the Ministry of Education and Training, educational documents, program organization plans, and experiential activity content. In particular, they studied the plan and content of the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program in 2026, and the model of organizing "Rural Market" activities in cultural and heritage preservation education combined with national defense and security education.

3.2. Comparative Method

The research team used a comparative method to analyze the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program in two stages: The pre-reform phase (i.e., from 2024 onwards) and the key reform phase (specific research in 2025–2026) will be based on the following criteria: Objectives (From disciplinary training to competency development); Content (From basic military training to diverse experiences); Methods (From instruction to task organization); Evaluation (From feedback to competency assessment).

4. CURRENT STATUS OF THE "WE LEARN TO BE SOLDIERS" PROGRAM

4.1. Requirements for reforming National Defense and Security education

The target learners of the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program is: High secondary students. Each session lasts 10 days. The program's objectives are: to help students experience the military environment; to cultivate discipline and good conduct; to educate students about traditions; and to develop comprehensive life skills. [6].

4.2. Program content for 2026

Program structure: In 2026, the program includes activity groups such as drill and discipline; soldier's conduct training; military martial arts; agricultural production; soldier's cook; rural market activities; and soldier's family activities. Specifically, as shown in Table 1:

Action	Group Content
Military	Drill regulations, learning soldier's conduct.
Physical	Military martial arts, physical activity
Labor	The soldiers' vegetable garden, the soldiers' kitchen.
Skill	The survival knot, overcoming the challenge.
Culture	Rural markets, folk games
Family – Society	Soldiers and their families

Table 1. Content of our soldier training program.

5. PROGRAM INNOVATION THROUGH DIFFERENT PHASES

5.1. Innovation in educational perspectives

Previous phase: From 2024 onwards, the model mainly focused on: Getting acquainted with the military environment; developing discipline. Developing good manners.

Current phase: The program aims to Developing personal capabilities; social skills; adaptability and civic values.

Content	Pre-innovation model	Current model
Education Center	Instructor	Learners
Learning methods	Receive – Implement	Experience – Feedback – Application
Target	Discipline and order	Holistic development
Space	Barracks	Barracks + culture + community

Table 2. Comparison of model transformation between the two phases

Table 2 below will specifically show a comparison of the model transformation.

5.2. Content Innovation

The content is designed to be more diverse and comprehensive, aiming to provide learners with holistic experiences that enhance their knowledge and skills through experiential activities within the program.

Field	Before	Currently
Military	Regulations, internal affairs	Regulations + martial arts + challenges
Skill	Group living	Survival skills, problem-solving skills

Labor	Education of awareness	Production experience
Culture	Exchange	Rural markets, folk games

Table 3. Expanding the operating system

In Table 3, the integrated "Rural Market" activity demonstrates the trend of combining National Defense and Security education with traditional culture education, helping students experience communication, cooperation, and learn about community values.

5.3. Innovation in assessment and methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of the experiential learning program, a comprehensive set of evaluation criteria is needed, focusing on changes in students' qualities, skills, and abilities. These include: discipline, demonstrated through adherence to rules and regulations and strict adherence to daily routines; independence, assessed through self-care, self-management, and proactively completing personal tasks; collaboration, shown through coordination, support, and effective teamwork; and physical fitness, reflected in participation in health training, physical activities, and the ability to overcome challenges. Most importantly, cognitive ability is assessed through understanding of national traditions, the role of national defense and security, and a sense of civic responsibility towards the community and the country.

6. SOLUTIONS

Based on the current situation of organizing the "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program, to further improve the quality and effectiveness of education, the following solutions should be focused on:

Firstly, develop experiential learning programs linked to specific educational goals. Establish program outcomes for each module/activity. Program content should be designed based on clearly defining what students will achieve after participating. Each experiential activity needs to have a clear educational purpose, avoiding activities that are merely for fun or to promote a sense of community.

Secondly, we need to refine the criteria for evaluating students' progress after the experience. Currently, the assessment of program participation results is mainly based on the training process and general comments. Therefore, we need to develop a specific system of criteria to monitor changes in students' discipline, independence, cooperation skills, physical fitness, and awareness of civic responsibility.

Thirdly, strengthen coordination among stakeholders such as the National Defense and Security Education Center, schools, and families. The effectiveness of experiential learning activities depends not only on the time students spend at the Center but also on the support of the school and family. The school needs to cooperate in selecting content that suits the characteristics of the students; the family needs to continue to maintain and reinforce the good skills and habits that students develop during the experiential learning process.

Fourth, the application of technology in program management and evaluation.

The use of digital technology in student management, storing training results, and surveying feedback will make the program organization process more scientific and effective through online surveys. Data collected from each course will be an important basis for evaluating the suitability of the content and organizational methods, and for further program innovation.

7. CONCLUSION

Innovating national defense and security education through practical, hands-on experiences is a truly appropriate approach to current educational requirements. The "We Learn to Be Soldiers" program demonstrates a shift from a purely military training model to a comprehensive experiential education model, in which students develop their awareness, skills, physical abilities, and social responsibility.

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