

## **Education Access and Continuity in Northern Laos: – A Comparative Study of the Hmong and Lanten Minorities**

**By**

**Miki Inui**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate the access to school education of the Hmong and Lanten ethnic minority groups in Northern Laos and to examine the continuity of education in these populations. More specifically, the investigation probed when and why many children from these groups tend to withdraw from formal education or never enter it in the first place. Finally, the results obtained from a comparative qualitative analysis were evaluated to contemplate interventions that could help to eliminate the prevalence of out-of-school children. In order to achieve these aims, field research was conducted in both Hmong and Lanten villages in 2020. The first key finding includes the unique characteristics and differential causes of OOSCY (Out-of-School Children and Youth) in each village. Previous research on OOSCY tended to lump all ethnic minorities together; however, this study has been able to identify particular features, such as in the Hmong village, that in addition to poverty and tough geographical conditions impacted continuing to secondary education, these factors included early marriage. The second key finding is the importance of grasping the specific time and reasons for dropping out. From certain cases in the Lanten villages, one can discern a pattern of the ages and grades at which students drop out of school. Thus, dropping out could be prevented by providing suitable assistance in these specific grades. In conclusion, investigating the chronology of the discontinuation of education and the generation of appropriate intervention strategies grounded in enrollment patterns would be a worthwhile endeavor.

**Keywords:** Access to Education, Laos, Hmong, Lanten, Out-of-School children, Ethnic Minorities

## **Introduction/Background**

Despite international efforts to improve educational access and continuity, there are approximately 258 million children and youth worldwide who do not attend school. UNESCO (2019) defines this population as Out-of-School Children (OOSC, 6-12 years old) and Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY, 6-18 years old). Hereafter, this research paper shall use the terms OOSC and OOSCY to refer to these children and youth. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) (2018), the Southeast Asian countries with the largest number of OOSC are Indonesia (2,016,360), the Philippines (586,284), and Cambodia (184,284). Despite its smaller population, Laos has the third-highest percentage (6.66%) of OOSC (50,332) in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), after Cambodia (9.44%) and Indonesia (7.44%). One must take into account that the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused an increase in the number of OOSC. However, this paper is concerned with the pre-pandemic period, when the field research was conducted.

Children in Laos attend school for an average of only 4.6 years, less than the five years required to complete primary education. This school attendance is lower than in Malaysia (9.5 years) and Thailand (7.3 years) (UNESCO 2017). In Laos, children from poor rural communities, girls, and ethnic minorities have the highest exclusion rates (World Bank 2016, UNESCO 2017, Noonan 2018). This study focused on Northern Laos, which has a larger minority population, and higher rates of poverty and female and ethnic

minority exclusion from education, than in other regions.

In Laos, the poverty line is determined at 1.1 USD per day (i.e., persons living on less than this amount per day fall below the poverty line). In 2018-19, the poverty headcount rate was 18.3%. The poverty rate of the capital, Vientiane, is 5.0%, and that of North and South Laos is 20.7% and 17.7%, respectively (Lao Statistics Bureau 2020). This indicates that Northern Laos, the field area of this research, has the highest poverty rate in the country.

During the 2010s, several studies pointed out that minority women in Laos were empowered and had undergone confirmed social change. For instance, Hmong and Khmu women, who belong to relatively large minority groups, attempted to empower themselves by adopting certain cultural norms of the majority groups, or changing some of their traditions, such as a “matri-lifestyle” (Schenk-Sandbergen 2012). Inui (2015) also found that the increased educational participation of Hmong females has improved their labor market mobility and labor force participation. These positive changes allow for a presumption that the educational access of minorities has significantly improved. However, what is the actual situation in the disadvantaged areas?

This study had two objectives. The first was investigating the educational access of the Hmong and Lanten, two ethnic minority groups in the economically and socially disadvantaged areas of Northern Laos. The second was drawing a comparison between these two groups, and determining the causes of dropping out. The basic question was,

“When and why do people from these groups withdraw from formal education?”

The formal education system comprises five levels: pre-school, primary school (five years), lower secondary school (four years), higher secondary school (three years), and higher education. Higher education involves universities, private colleges, teacher training colleges, and technical and vocational institutions. Of these, compulsory education covers the primary and lower secondary education levels. This research too focuses on these levels, as this is when people mostly tend to drop out.

The research methodology comprised interviews conducted in three ethnic minority villages in the northern provinces of Luang Phrabang and Luang Namtha. These were used for a comparative analysis of the Hmong and Lanten people, and results were used to evaluate policy interventions for eliminating the prevalence of OOSC.

### **Research Framework**

Previous research on enrollment and challenges to education indicates problems of funding, such as insufficient local government budgets, limited local staff capacity, incomplete school infrastructure<sup>1</sup>, and teacher shortages (Hanushek, Lavy & Kohtaro 2008, Inui 2009, Onphanhdala & Suruga 2008, Sisouphanthong & Suruga 2020). Moreover, socio-cultural challenges such as early marriage, child labor, and housework are also related to high dropout rates (Ittihda 2015, UNESCO 2017, Xayavong & Pholhirul 2018, Inui 2020a). According to the World Bank, girls often get married because of pressure from parents and relatives, poverty, and lack of alternatives<sup>2</sup>. Finally, there are

significant disparities in access to education and educational quality according to region (Inui 2020b).

These issues can be organized into three categories: administrative, school, and family factors. Administrative factors relate to the weak management of education by local governments. Since the decentralization of the Lao government in 2000, management and governance have been handed over to local governments.

As the central organization for education, the Ministry of Education and Sports assumes all the responsibilities of management, budget, curriculum, and international aid. The Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS), established in each province, is responsible for educational development and planning, budget control, and the supply of teachers in secondary, technical, and vocational education sectors. District Education and Sports Bureaus (DESB), established in each provincial district, have the overall responsibility of pre-primary, primary, and non-formal education. However, local governments struggle to carry out these responsibilities due to limited human resource capacity and budget shortages (Bestari, Mongcopa, Samson & Ward 2006, The United Nations 2015).

These administrative factors directly have a negative impact on the second category (i.e., school factors). Because of restricted access to schools, lack of school facilities, and budget shortages leading to incomplete school infrastructure, many children stay away from or drop out of the education system (Asian Development Bank 2000,

Berge, Chounlamany, Khouphilaphanh & Silfver 2017, The United Nations 2015). The Laos National Census (2015) reported that 13.3% of people in rural areas without road access have never been to school, compared to 8.6% of people in rural areas with road access, and 2.1% of people in urban areas (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015). Therefore, this research focused on remote villages where accessing school was difficult.

The third category, family factors, relates to the demand for education and the familial and socio-cultural factors that impact children's enrollment in education. Some of the factors preventing youth from acquiring a formal education are poverty, lack of adequate household funds, and children's engagement in housework. From a financial perspective, parents are reluctant to send their children to school, as education is not seen as an opportunity cost. Particularly, minority groups accord girls less priority than boys. Early marriage and child labor are still practiced in ethnic minority groups, both of which have a negative impact on educational attainment (UNICEF 2020).

According to the Laos National Census (2015), 15.1% of girls in villages without road access gave birth for the first time under the age of 17, compared to 11.6% in rural areas with road access, and 5.8% in urban areas. In addition, in villages without road access, the average number of children per family is 4.4, compared to 3.9 in rural areas with road access, and 3.2 in urban areas (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015). As the number of children has a significant impact on family poverty, it is worth examining the impact of early marriage, prolificacy, and related customs on educational attainment.

This study examines how these factors impact the prevalence of OOSCY at the local level.

### **The Government Policy for OOSC after 2000 and Current Disparities**

The Lao government's education policy focuses on eliminating the prevalence of OOSC, with special regard to the development of primary education. This began after Laos' participation in the "World Conference of Education for All (1990)," which triggered numerous international education projects.

The "Education for All: National Plan of Action, 2003-2015" (MOE & UNESCO 2005) was implemented to prioritize access, quality, and management of education for minorities, girls, and poor families, with focus on certain specific goals and the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In addition, the educational policy document, "National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education, 2011-2015," aims at eliminating disparities in educational access for disadvantaged groups (especially females), ethnic groups, and disadvantaged socio-economic groups (MOES 2011). Through these improvements, the Lao government sought to ensure that ethnic groups and females have equal access to education. It did yield results; for example, the number of out-of-school girls decreased from 25,196 in 2011 to 21,968 in 2015 (UIS 2018).

The Education Sector Development Plan for 2016-2020 focused on equal access to quality education, as demonstrated in statements such as "the number of learners from Early Childhood Education to lower secondary grade 9 increases with a special focus on disadvantaged learners and also by ensuring gender equity" (MOES 2015). The

government has incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into all national planning frameworks, especially for strengthening financial plans, addressing teachers' non-performance, and prioritizing lifelong learning through informal education programs (Government of the Lao PDR 2018).

To replicate the achievements of 2016-2020<sup>3</sup>, the Lao government has initiated the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan, 2021–2025. The latest plan focuses on reducing disparities between genders, ethnic minority groups, and income groups, especially in disadvantaged districts. As these targets coincide with the focus of this research, they helped verify the significance of the research objective (i.e., investigating access to education in economically and socially disadvantaged areas).

### **School Attendance by Region and Province**

Despite efforts by governmental and international agencies, regional and ethnic disparities continue to exist. The typical OOSC lives in a rural area without road access. They are poor and likely to belong to a minority ethnic group (World Bank 2016).

The National Census (2015) defines school attendance (of children aged six and above) as “attendance at any regular accredited educational institution or program, public or private, organized at any level of education.” The census categories include “never attended school,” “currently attending,” and “attended before.” There is a clear difference between the “never attended” and “attended before” statuses of people in the capital city, Vientiane, and of people in the Luang Namtha and Luang Phrabang regions: 2.4% of the

people in Vientiane, and 27.3% of the people in Luang Namtha, have “never attended” school. Meanwhile, the rate of people who “never attended school” in Luang Phrabang (14.2%) was only slightly higher than the national average (13.1%). However, as the specific research site is located in a remote area of the province, one could expect intra-province rates to differ (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015).

OOSC rates also differed significantly among the provinces. For instance, while the rate is only 27.6% in Vientiane, those of Luang Namtha and Luang Phrabang are 36.7% and 29.4%, respectively (Coulombe, Epprecht, Pimhidzai & Vilaysouk 2016). Possible reasons for this include the lack of improvement in access to schools in mountainous areas, making it difficult for students to continue their education, and the low quality of education in mountainous areas due to limited educational budgets for rural areas (Inui 2020a, 2020b).

### **Ethnic Disparities**

There are 49 ethnic groups in Laos. The National Census (2015) categorized them into four ethnic lineages, as shown in Table 1. The majority group (i.e., the Tai-Kadai [Lao Loum]) speak the national language, Lao, and have traditionally dominated politics and economics in the lowlands. All the other ethnic groups have their own language and culture, and generally live in mountainous areas (Hanushek, Lavy & Kohtaro 2008, Inui 2015).

Table 1. Ethnic groups in Laos

Ethnic lineages	Examples of ethnic groups	Rate
Tai-Kadai (Lao Loum)	Lao, Leu, Phoutai	66.2 %
Austro-Asiatic (Lao Thueng)	Khamu, Katang, Makong, Tri	22.9 %
Hmong-Yao (Lao Soung)	Hmong, Yao (Lanten)	7.4 %
Sino-Tibetan (Lao Soung)	Kor, Phounoy	2.7 %

Note: Loum = lowlands, Thueng = midlands, Soung = highlands

Source: Ministry of Education 2000 and Lao Statistics Bureau 2015

Ethnic background, particularly language, deserves attention, as it impacts educational achievement. According to the Lao Statistics Bureau (2015), the literacy rate of minority ethnic groups is extremely low, when compared with that of the majority ethnic group. The majority Tai-Kadai have a literacy rate of 93.5%, while the Austro-Asiatic, Hmong-Yao, and Sino-Tibetan have literacy rates of 76.0%, 75.5%, and 57.0%, respectively. The Hmong and Lanten groups, the focus of this research, belong to the Hmong-Yao group, as shown in Table 1<sup>4</sup>. A primary reason for this discrepancy in literacy rates is that only the Tai-Kadai group speaks Lao, the language of instruction in schools. For minorities who face difficulty in learning Lao as a second language, acquiring the basic skills for completing primary education is a challenge. Many students drop out of school because the language barrier obstructs them in comprehending the course content (Berge, Chounlamany, Khoupilaphanh & Silfver 2017, The United Nations 2015).

### **Significance of this Research**

Previous research has highlighted the causes of OOSC and the disadvantaged situation of ethnic minorities, as mentioned above. However, the time and reasons for dropping out of school have not been examined at the micro-level. Therefore, this research investigated the tendency of dropping out of school, according to gender and age, at specific research sites.

The timing of dropping out of school has been previously reported. For instance, the World Bank (2017) reported that the highest primary education dropout rates were in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, while in 2018, the highest rates were reported in the transition from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (UIS 2018, Somsanith & Noonan 2020). UIS (2018) reported that the highest secondary education dropout rates were in the transition from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year. However, the exact time and reasons for dropping out have not been examined at a deeper level. Although the out-of-school rate has declined considerably, an increase in the Gross Enrollment Rate and the Net Enrollment Rate (Vongvichith, Sisouvong & Noonan 2020) makes it worth examining why students drop out and when they do.

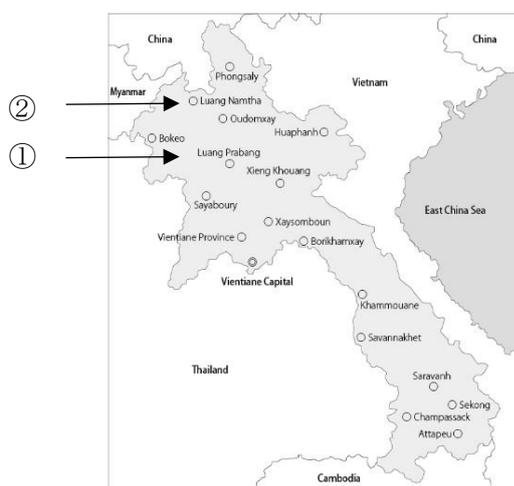
Quantitative research, utilizing household data (2012)<sup>5</sup> and multinomial logit models, has found that the growth of agriculture and related services can increase OOSC rates because of the resulting increase in the demand for labor (Siouphanthong & Suruga 2020). Although it is a convincing argument, one must note that the development of industries, such as agriculture and services, is an essential phenomenon of a different kind,

and needs to be examined separately. It is important to take a micro-viewpoint, to arrive at a conclusion that focuses on the stakeholders' daily lives. Therefore, this research adopted a qualitative perspective for gaining insight into the time and reasons for children and youth discontinuing their education.

## Research Methodology

### Research Sites

One Hmong village (Village P) in ① Luang Phrabang Province and two Lanten villages (Villages D and L) in ② Luang Namtha Province were chosen as the target field sites (Map 1). As presented in Table 2, the rate of people “never attended school” was high in both provinces, at 14.2% and 27.3%, respectively, compared to the rate in the capital (2.4%).



Map 1. Location of the target field sites

Table 2 reveals that both the ethnic minority population and poverty rates are much higher in these provinces than in the capital. Especially in Luang Namtha Province, the percentage ethnic minority is almost 90%. With regards to education, the percentage of OOSC is high, and that of independent learners who perform above the second benchmark is much lower in Luang Namtha (4.59%) and Luang Phrabang (24.14%) than that in Vientiane (49.5%).

Table 2. The benchmarks of targeted provinces

	Luang Namtha	Luang Phrabang	Vientiane
Ethnic minority population (%)	88.64	66.5	8.0
Rate of poverty (%)	21.1	22.9	8.5
OOSC (%)	27.3	15.2	13.4
*Independent learners (%)	4.59	24.14	49.5

Source :Lao Statistics Bureau 2015, Coulombe et. al. 2016, MOES & RIES 2014)

Note: \*who performed above the second benchmark.

Tables 3 and 4 provide an overview of the field research and research subjects, respectively.

Table 3. Overview of field research

Time of Research	Province	Minority	Location
January, February 2020	Luang Phrabang	Hmong	Mountaintop with steep mountain trail (no road)
March 2019, January 2020	Luang Namtha	Lanten	Upland with unpaved pathways

Table 4. Age groups of research subjects

Subjects	Number	Gender*	Age	Age	Age	Age	Age
			10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–70
Hmong	24	F12,M12	4	5	6	4	5
Lanten	23	F12,M11	5	4	6	3	5

Note: \*F=female, M=male

In addition to interviews with the research subjects, interviews were conducted with officers of the local education authority (DESB and PESS in Luang Phrabang and Luang Namtha) to better examine the realities of dropping out of school in these areas.

Table 4. Overview of the interview

Time of Research	Province	Interviewees	Affiliation
January, February 2020	Luang Phrabang	Deputy Director, Staff in charge of school construction	PESS DESB
March 2019, January 2020	Luang Namtha	Staff in charge of primary education, Education Statistics	PESS

### **Characteristics of the Hmong Village (Village P)**

The Hmong village is located on a mountaintop, to which access requires a two-hour trip, first along a major road from the center of Luang Phrabang Province, and then an eight kilometer long unpaved pathway (a drive of approximately 20 minutes). The mountain path connecting the major road and the village is gentle but steep. Since the village is located at an altitude of 800 meters, it can only be accessed by four-wheel-drive vehicles. It is a typical “village with no roads,” consisting of 74 households at the time of this research.

A primary school is located at the highest point of the village (the mountaintop), which is about a few hundred meters away from each house. About 70 children attend the school, with only two teachers. The DESB’s budget shortage resulted in the school being built only of wooden boards and zinc sheeting (Photos 3 and 4).

The school has been given a fixed grant called the “School Block Grant” by the government in accordance with the number of students, approximately 14 USD per year for each student. However, as the total amount (approximately 980 USD) is used for educational materials or repair costs, the grant is not enough for building a new school. Reaching a lower secondary school from the village is very difficult. Children have to go down an approximately seven to eight-kilometer-long pathway, on foot, from a mountaintop similar to that in Photo 1, and then take the major road.

It takes about two hours from the village to the secondary school. Some lower secondary school students lived in a boarding house near the school, built by their parents, to avoid the inconvenient access ways.

Most of the villagers engage in slash-and-burn farming (Photo 2), and chiefly grow rice and raise farm animals. The poverty ratio of the area around the village used to be as high as 40%–60% (Poverty Reduction Fund 2012). As the Hmong people prefer to live on the mountaintop, without significant relations with other minority groups, the village has maintained the traditional norms and customs of the Hmong.



Photo 1. Unpaved road to Hmong village



Photo 2. Slash-and-burn farming



Photo 3. Primary school in the village



Photo 4. Classroom of the school

### **Characteristics of the Lanten Villages (Village D and Village L)**

Villages D and L comprise the Lanten, an ethnic minority, and are located 10 kilometers (a drive of approximately 20 minutes) away from the center of the Luang Namtha Province. Some pathways leading off the major road are unpaved and difficult to traverse even by vehicles.

The altitude of the area is about 550–600 meters. The initial plan was to conduct an investigation only in Village D, however it had a small number of households, and many of the inhabitants were out at work during the time slated for interviews. Thus, it

was decided that interviews would also be conducted at Village L, a neighboring Lanten village.

The number of households of Village D and Village L are approximately 86 and 40, respectively. People in both villages are engaged in growing rice, working in the rubber industry, indigo dyeing, and needlework. When the author of this paper visited both villages, most women were doing skillful needlework (Photo 5). Generally, they generate cash income by selling their products in the market, or to tourists visiting the village.



Photo 5. Products by needlework (Village L)



Photo 6. Indigo dyeing (Village D)



Photo 7. A primary school in Village L



Photo 8. A primary school in Village D

In both villages, a primary school is located in the center (see Photos 7 and 8). A lower secondary school is located in a town two to three kilometers away from the villages, which makes access by a bicycle relatively convenient. The number of children enrolled in the primary schools of Village L and D was approximately 50, and both the schools have multiple grade classes, similar to that in the Hmong village. This combined-class system consists of a class that teaches combined lessons from two grades (1<sup>st</sup> grade and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade), and another class that teaches lessons combined from three grades (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades). Because the schools in Village D and L are built of concrete, as shown in Photos 7 and 8, they appear to be better constructed than the Hmong village school. These two primary schools had been targeted by the UN World Food Programme's school-feeding program (WFP), and hence, provided lunch to their students<sup>6</sup>.

### **Interview Procedure**

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in the target villages. The purpose of the research was explained to the village heads and research collaborators. They were the people who made a random selection of research subjects, as they knew the composition of the village populations with regard to age and gender. Specifically, to record the educational experiences of various age groups, villagers in the age group of 10-70 were selected. In the Hmong village, interviews were conducted by visiting the houses of villagers, who were introduced by the village head and teachers. The teachers

were inhabitants of the village, and spoke Hmong and Lao. Interviews were conducted primarily by the author, who speaks basic Lao, and a research collaborator (a Lao female). The teacher aided interpretation when the subjects spoke only Hmong. All the interviews were transcribed with the help of a research collaborator.

The research subjects in the Lanten villages were selected as per the research collaborators' recommendations, as they had a thorough knowledge of the village demographics. The author and research collaborator could conduct interviews directly in these villages, since all the subjects spoke Lao. Each interview lasted for about 15-20 minutes, depending on the subjects. The major interview question was, "When and why did you leave school?" Concretely, age of marriage, occupation and the grade at which they quit school, and the reasons for quitting school.

In the Hmong village, respondents were also questioned about their age of marriage and number of children; this was because a small group interview, conducted before the individual interviews, had revealed that most people married in their teens.

With regard to the Hmong village, additional online interviews were conducted in February 2021, with the help of a research collaborator who lives in Laos. The basic question concerned the pathway of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students who had graduated in the 2020 school year, and their obstacles in proceeding to secondary school (for those who did not go to secondary schools<sup>7</sup>). In March 2021, additional inquiries were made about the

Lanten villages, via e-mails to a research collaborator. The questions were the same as mentioned above.

## **Results of the Hmong**

### **The Educational Experiences of Females in the Hmong Village**

In order to analyze the data, subjects were categorized by gender and listed in an ascending order of age groups. Then, the major interview results, such as age of marriage, the grade at which they quit school, and the reasons for quitting, were summarized in a table. This made the general pattern of educational experiences clear.

The 24 interview subjects (12 females, 12 males) in the Hmong village were categorized by gender and age.

The results are shown in Table 5. Each subject is marked by their gender, followed by a number from ① to ⑫ with pseudonyms. These designations are also used when the subject is described individually.

As the interviews progressed, a common tendency was observed across age groups. As a consequence, the educational experiences were organized by categorizing the subjects into gender and age groups (10s-20s, 30s-40s, and 50s-70s).

Table 5. Educational experiences of females in the Hmong village

Subject (Pseudonyms)	Age	married age (number of children)	***Grade of quitting school	Reason for quitting school
①Paiv	19	17 (2)	S5 (Secondary 5 <sup>th</sup> )	No money (poverty) and got married
② Mim	19	16 (3)	P4 (Primary 4 <sup>th</sup> )	Married and left school
③ Nia	20	17 (2)	P5 (Primary 5 <sup>th</sup> )	Helping parents (five siblings)
④ Qhua	23	15 (2)	P5	Helping family (five siblings)
⑤Me	30	15 (5)	Never attended	No school in village
⑥Cua	30	15 or 16 (*)	Never attended	School is far (8 km)
⑦See	30	15 or 16 (6)	Never attended	No school in village
⑧Yiv	38	17 or 18 (7)	Never attended	Poverty, school is far
⑨Lig	40	20 (6)	Never attended	No school in village
⑩Paj	**51	30, remarried	Never attended	No school in village
⑪Hli	**70	*Not stated	Never attended	No school in village
⑫Kab	**70	*Cannot remember	Never attended	No school in village

Notes: \*Did not answer; \*\* Cannot remember the exact age;

Their occupation is slash-and-burn agriculture

\*\*\*S5=secondary school 5th grade, P4=primary school 4<sup>th</sup> grade, as noted in the table

First, three subjects in the 10–20 age group(①–④) had quit at the primary school level. It was found that they had married between the ages of 15 and 17. Paiv continued her education until the 5th year of secondary school, but later quit due to poverty and chose to get married . According to the interview, the average villagers’ cash income per year is approximately 500-800 USD from selling rice and corn they cultivated. As the amount is far lower than the public officer’s annual income, approximately 3,000 USD in the country, surviving their everyday life is the biggest challenge for them.

Subjects Nia and Qhua left school because they had many siblings and it caused poverty. This choice was influenced by a common custom among ethnic minorities whereby it is the men who continue receiving formal education if a family has many siblings. According to the DESB staff, Hmong women get married between the ages of 15 and 17, and give birth to many children. It was observed that this custom is still prevalent in the villages. Mim is originally from another village (Village H) located about one hour away from the Hmong village. She fell in love with a man from Village P, who had visited her village when she was 15 years old, and married him. She considered it the natural thing to do.

A characteristic feature of women in the 30–40 age group (⑤–⑨) was that they had never attended school. This was because the village did not have a complete school when they were young. Regarding this, Yiv spoke as follows:

Author: Why you did not commute to a school in another village?

Female: We did not want to commute to school by taking risks, such as traveling through difficult roads for several hours.

Author: Instead of commuting to school, what did you do?

Female: We chose to engage in farming, because staying at a boarding house costs money. This village is too poor to build a school for itself.

Because of the chronic budget shortage and a lack of manpower, it has been difficult to manage school buildings at the local level. In other words, it is an administrative problem. The local DESB could not secure a budget for building infrastructure or hiring teachers. Moreover, building a school on a mountaintop, such as in Village P, is extremely hard, resulting in a lack of educational infrastructure. This might have been why women in the 30-40 age group showed little interest and motivation to attend school.

It was also discovered that women in the 50–70 age group (⑩–⑫) had no experience of attending school. Moreover, they could not recall detailed personal information, such as their age and their age of marriage; hence, it this information is not included as part of Table 5. The rough mountainous terrain was compounded with the lack of socio-cultural customs that recorded personal information, such as maintaining a family register or counting ages.

However, interviewing the village head revealed that the older women had not attended school because there was, in fact, no school to attend when they were younger. It was discerned through the interviews that poverty had made practices such as women's greater contribution to housework, early marriage, high fertility rates, and high dropout rates commonplace. According to the PESS staff, if the family suffers from poverty and cannot afford to raise children, the family lets girls get married. And, after the marriage,

they end up leaving school. Therefore, family and school factors affected access to education.

Although this paper stated at the beginning that the gender gap in Laos is decreasing, one finds that it still exists in ethnic minority villages. The only solution to not dropping out of schools located in far-flung locations was staying at relatives' homes, or in boarding houses. A PESS staff stated that in remote villages like Village P, students, especially girls, tend to drop out due to difficulties in accessing schools, and poverty. A combination of traditionalism and monotony in everyday life led OOSCY to marry early, keeping them farther away from education. In such a scenario, they would end up as either illiterate or semi-literate, with low numerical skills. The latter consequently causes an unstable cash income and perpetuates poverty.

### **The Educational Experiences of Males in the Hmong Village**

Table 6 shows the results obtained from interviews with male villagers. Two teenage male respondents (Cenb, Pov) helped their family with slash-and-burn farming after quitting school. The author observed on her visit to the village that young boys, who appeared to be in their teens, were gathered around without seemingly much to do. This was because they could neither find ways to go to nor afford to live near schools.

Of all the male respondents in their teens and 20s, only Xmn had graduated from higher secondary school. He had graduated from a primary school by living with a relative

near a town. He then received a scholarship to attend lower and higher secondary schools as a boarder. After graduation, he was employed by Save the Children, an international NGO, under a two-year contract to work as a kindergarten teacher in the village. He earns 80 US dollars a month, and his life is much more stable than that of the villagers without any cash income.

Table 6. Educational experiences of males in the Hmong village

Subject (pseudonyms)	Age	***Grade of quitting school	Reason for quitting school
	(job, except farming)		
①Ceeb	17	S3	Helping family
②Pov	17	P5	Parents wanted him to quit to help family
③Xmn	21 (Kindergarten staff)	S6	Did not quit. Stayed with relatives since P1 and went to boarding secondary school with scholarship
④Zoov	25	S2	Too many brothers, too poor
⑤Yis	28	P4	Got married
⑥Moos	30	Never attended	No school (until P2 at village), too far to P3 school
⑦Yob	30 (Deputy head)	University	Did not quit. Stayed with relatives and continued education
⑧Rom	40	S4	Too far to go to school (7 km)
⑨Tob	40	S2	Too many brothers, too poor
⑩Yeeb	*45	P5	Poverty, school is too far
⑪Neeb	*60	Never attended	No school at that time
⑫Lis	*70	Never attended	No school at that time

Note: \*Did not answer; \*\* Cannot remember the exact age;

\*\*\*S5=secondary school 5th grade, P4=primary school 4<sup>th</sup> grade, as noted in the table

An interesting aspect of the 30–40 age group was their categorization into groups who had attended (Yob, Rom, Tob) and not attended school (Moos). There was a school in the village, but it was incomplete, consisting of only the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades<sup>8</sup>. To receive education from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade onwards, the children had to go to another village (Village N) with a complete school, which required them to make a one-way trip of approximately two hours on a mountain trail without even a proper road. This could be the reason why Moos avoided going to school even after becoming old enough to attend the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Rom, Tob, and Yeeb went to school by walking and riding bicycles on the mountain trail, but the long distance and poverty prevented them from continuing their formal education. Only Yob was able to continue his education, as he had been entrusted in the care of relatives living in a town.

The villagers would have attended higher secondary schools and universities if access was convenient and economic conditions were better (or, for instance, they received scholarships). In other words, in the case of males also, family and school factors significantly impacted educational experiences. Of these two, school factors can be solved by the intervention of the local administration, such as the DESB; however, its budget is limited. Thus, this can also be considered an administrative factor.

An interesting aspect of the 60-70 age group was their inability to attend school because there was no school to attend. Interviews with the male villagers revealed that, in contrast to females, they would have continued with their formal education if there had been schools to attend. This was not the view of female respondents, who tended to get married and quit school anyway. Therefore, one could possibly conclude that a gender gap still exists in Hmong villages.

Moreover, results of the additional interviews showed that four out of nine primary graduates in the 2020 school year did not proceed to secondary school due to financial constraints. As mentioned earlier, this would have required them to stay at a boarding house, due to the long distance to school. The primary school director also mentioned that due to the limited capacity and high living expenses of the boarding house, many dropped out of school at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. According to the director, of the five students who proceeded to secondary school, one student had dropped out due to financial constraints. One could summarize that all three factors (i.e., administrative, school, and family) impacted the prevalence of OOSCY in the Hmong village.

## **Results of Lanten**

### **Education Status Categorized by Gender and Age**

The 23 subjects (12 females, 11 males) who were interviewed in the Lanten villages were categorized by gender and age, and the results are shown in Tables 7 and 8.

People in these villages are engaged in jobs other than farming (such as needlework), which is different from the Hmong village, where everyone is engaged in farming<sup>9</sup>. Thus, people’s occupations have been added to the tables.

Moreover, ages of marriage were not noted because the informal group interview, conducted before the individual interviews, had already indicated that the average age of marriage was around 20 years old<sup>10</sup>.

Table 7. Educational experiences of females in the Lanten villages

Subject pseudonyms	Age	Marital status (Number of kids)	Occupation	*Grade of quitting school	Reason for quitting school
①Vany	13	Not married	Housework	P5	Parents wanted me to work
②Noy	18	Not married	Student at Chinese school	Study Chinese after secondary school	Continue to study for business opportunities
③Mine	18	Not married	Needlework	S2	Family is too poor
④Ouy	19	Married (2)	Needlework	S2	Poverty, dislike studying
⑤Doun	25	Married (2)	Needlework	P5	Family is too poor
⑥Suk	28	Married (2)	Farming, needle work	S2	Family is too poor
⑦Bounmy	30	Married (3)	Needlework, sales. Farming	P3	Engage in work
⑧Nim	35	Married (3)	Needlework	P3	Repetition made me dislike school
⑨Sengdao	38	Married (3)	Needlework	Never attended	Wanted to get married
⑩Kob	43	Married (5)	Needlework	Never attended	Poverty and worked at home
⑪Sen	44	Married (3)	Needlework, farming, sales	P3	School is far
⑫Mee	75	Married (2)	Needlework	Never attended	No school

Note: \*S5=secondary school 5<sup>th</sup> grade, P4=primary school 4<sup>th</sup> grade, as noted in the table

Similar to P village, poverty, engagement in work, and access to school were the major reasons to quit school. According to the interview, the average income is

approximately 1,000 USD from selling needlework or farming at rubber plantations. The amount is higher than in P village. For example, Bounmy employs village women and sells their needlework products. As she created sales channels for the needlework, village women are encouraged to obtain the necessary skills and earn their own income.

Unlike in the Hmong village, no specific tendencies were discerned as per respondents' gender and age. However, the results have been presented according to gender in this section as well.

It was found that the older the villagers were, the lower the number of people who had attended or graduated school (for both genders) as shown in Tables 7 and 8. Nonetheless, villagers like Ong and Tui, who were in their 30s, had graduated from either higher secondary or graduate school<sup>11</sup>. Tong said that since he had decided to join the army, he could attend the army school and thus be in a stable occupation (i.e., teaching at the army school).

Table 8. Educational experiences of males in the Lanten villages

Subject (pseudonyms)	Age	Marital status (Number of children)	Occupation	*Grade of quitting school	Reason for quitting school
①Bunsai	14	Not married	Housework	S2	Did not understand the learning contents
②Kam	21	Not married	Study at university in China	Graduating (Electrics)	Completed because of a scholarship
③Keo	26	Married (1)	Farming	S2	Poverty due to many siblings/ Engage in farming
④Rassamy	30	Married (2)	Farming	P5	Farming, take care of family and work
⑤Tong	33	Married	Teacher at army school	S6	Completed secondary education because of entering army school.
⑥Tui	36	Married (1)	Instructor at teacher's college	Completed master degree	Completed because of a scholarship
⑦Sai	42	Married (4)	Farming	S3	School was too far
⑧Chit	55	Married (4)	Driver	S2	Did not want to study
⑨Vong	58	Married (4)	Roof repairs	Never attended	Migration labor to China
⑩Hangthong	59	Married	Farming	P5	Teachers disappeared (no school to go to)
⑪Som	60	Married (4)	No job	Never attended	No school

Note: \*S5=secondary school 5<sup>th</sup> grade, P4=primary school 4<sup>th</sup> grade, as noted in the table

Another feature of the Lanten villages was that some of the villagers such as Noy and Kam were studying Chinese in China to take better advantage of business opportunities, because Luang Namtha Province, where the two villages are, is located near China.

Another point of difference from the Hmong village is that people in the Lanten villages exercised a choice in whether or not to continue their studies, as shown by the examples of simply “dislike studying (Ouy), “Repetition made me dislike school” (Nim), and “did not want to study” (Chit). The reason for Chit not wanting to study was his doubt about whether the effort would positively impact his career prospects. Therefore, he chose

to drop out of school and become a driver. This implies whether they had a choice and intention to continue their education or not. This situation was not observed in the Hmong village, where most of the respondents were interested in studying but gave up regardless of their intention.

To summarize, the Lanten villagers showed cases of choosing to continue education or not. In addition, administrative, school, and family factors were observed in the Lanten villages, as in the Hmong village; however, the school factors had a weaker impact because there were confirmed alternatives to attending school.

### **Classifying Lanten Village School Dropouts into Patterns**

It is noteworthy that the age at which villagers dropped out of school had a common feature, an investigation of which yielded three patterns, as shown in Table 9. Of the 14 people who dropped out, the ages at which they left school could be categorized as P3 (primary 3<sup>rd</sup> grade: 3 villagers), P5 (primary 5<sup>th</sup> grade: 4 villagers), and S2 (secondary 2<sup>nd</sup> year: 6 villagers).

Table 9. The pattern of quitting school

Educational experience	Number	Reason for quitting school
Never attended	5	No school (2), school is far, poverty and work, migration to China
P3	3	Engage in work, dislike school due to repetition, school is too far
P5	4	Housework (3), farming, teacher disappeared (no school)
S2	6	Family poverty (3), farming (2), feeling negative towards studying

Note: ( ) shows more than one case

There were no villagers who dropped out of primary school in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grades. All the students who dropped out of lower secondary school did so at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, except for one case of dropping out in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year (Sai). This tendency matches the interview results obtained by the local PESS staff, which shall be reported later.

The reasons for never attending or quitting school, in the three above-mentioned groups, are described as follows.

### Never Attended School (5 villagers)

Elderly villagers are not the only ones without school experience, as it was found that variously aged villagers (such as 38, 43, 58 years old) also had no educational experience. The lack of a school, long distance to school, and poverty are understandable reasons for villagers not receiving an education. Moreover, Vong (male, 58 years old) could not attend school as he had to travel between Luang Namtha Province and China because his parents had cross-border jobs. As for Mee (75 years old) and Som (60 years old), the reason for never attending school was the school factor (i.e., the absence of schools). Furthermore, the family factor also had a significant impact on educational experiences, as in the Hmong village.

### Quitting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade of Primary School (3 villagers)

One of the patterns was dropping out of school at the age of 9 or 10 (around the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of primary school). Besides inevitable reasons such as the lack of schools, several other reasons were uncovered, such as prioritizing work (Bounmy), disliking school, discomfort with continuing after having to repeat a grade (Nim), and the long commute to school (Bounmy). The respondent who stated the long commute to school as a reason for dropping out also said that the school she attended was incomplete (having only the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grades), and continuing education (the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades) would have required her to attend school in the nearby village.

#### Quitting in the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade of Primary School (4 villagers)

The villagers tended to quit school because of poverty, and hence the need to help with farming and other housework, as was also observed in the Hmong village. This was the reason for three subjects (Vany, Doum, Rassamy) quitting primary school in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The reason for Hangthong dropping out of school was his teacher having shifted elsewhere. Thus, he ceased to have any school to attend (though the exact reason for this shift was not known).

An interview was conducted with an officer of the local PESS staff, on the reasons behind many villagers dropping out of school in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. According to the officer, primary education lasts five years, which is also the stipulated length of compulsory education. Thus, it was quite common for villagers to feel sufficiently educated on completing their primary education, and hence choosing to engage in working or farming for their families<sup>12</sup>. This tendency was not observed in the Hmong village.

#### Quitting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Year of Lower Secondary School (6 villagers)

It was observed that the largest number of people quit school in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of lower secondary school. Characteristically, three out of the six respondents (Mine, Ouy, and Suk) had quit school due to poverty, Keo had quit to pursue farming, and two (Bunsai, Chit) had quit for study-related reasons. Although none of them remembered exactly when they had left school, it was around the time when the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of secondary school

began, after the 1<sup>st</sup> year ended.

The results coincide with a report by Vongvichith, Sisouvong and Noonan (2020), which concluded that the largest number of dropouts in the early stages of lower secondary education comprised those who did so in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of lower secondary school.

The following is what an officer of the local PESS staff in Luang Namtha had to say on the matter:

Staff: The dropouts tend to be concentrated at the level after spending one year at school.

The reason is that after enrolling at lower secondary school, they gradually realize the hardship of commuting to school and become reluctant to study.

Author: What is an appropriate way of avoiding the situation?

Staff: Building a border school would be effective because students don't have to make long commutes. We must cater to students' needs even after the 2<sup>nd</sup> year; otherwise, they might drop out.

### **The Local Government's Intervention with Regard to OOSCY**

This research reveals various reasons for dropping out of school, related to administrative, school, and family factors. Simultaneously, it observed several local-level efforts to address the prevalence of OOSCY. Therefore, as a follow-up to these findings, interviews were conducted with an officer of the local PESS staff in each of the two

provinces. These revealed joint efforts by the government and the villages to create opportunities for students who have dropped out of school. For example, the PESS in Luang Namtha accepts OOSCY in the Technical Training Center, and teaches them to grow vegetables, raise chickens, and improve mechanical aptitude<sup>13</sup>. In this way, vocational training imparts OOSC with survival skills and opens avenues for income.

The PESS staff also described a flexible system for returning to schools. The “Village Education Development Committee,” consisting of representatives of villages and schools, has been established through the government’s initiative and cooperation among five neighboring villages. It allows students who have dropped out of school and wish to go back to choose a school from any of the five villages, instead of necessarily going back to the one in their own village. This system helps people go back to school, should they want to do so, even if they are working in a nearby village after having dropped out. In other words, the educational experiences were affected by family and school factors, but with the local government’s intervention, specifically administrative factors, continuing education can be truly successful. These flexible strategies of the local government have had a positive impact on continuing education.

However, this does not concur with the opinions of the aforementioned dropouts in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary school, as pointed out by Samsanith and Noonan (2020), and UNICEF (2018). All over the country, children from ethnic minorities face difficulties in

shifting to the Lao language on starting primary school, causing poor performance and OOSC in the primary stage, as mentioned in the previous study.

It is interesting to note that a different aspect emerges at the micro-level (the level of the villages). According to the PESS staff at Luang Namtha, this is probably because the children investigated in this research, both Hmong and Lanten, were not native speakers of Lao, and had only begun learning it in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary school. Moreover, as they all start learning Lao together from scratch, it is difficult to differentiate between their performances. This helps explain why few students drop out in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. This forestalled major differences in their school performances and prevented them from dropping out in the 1st grade.

## **Discussion**

### **Key Findings and Implications of this Research**

This study explicates the educational access of the Hmong and Lanten ethnic minority groups and determines the causes of the prevalence of OOSCY. The basic points of departure of the study.

The first key finding includes the unique characteristics and different causes of OOSCY in each village. Previous research on OOSCY tended to lump all ethnic minorities together; however, this study has been able to identify particular features, such as in the case of the Hmong village. Specifically, in addition to poverty and tough

geographical conditions, traditional norms such as early marriage impacted continuing to secondary education. Therefore, a response to these problems requires a micro-level examination of the particular characteristics.

The second key finding is the importance of grasping the specific time and reasons for dropping out. In certain cases in the Lanten villages, unlike in the Hmong village, one can discern a pattern of the ages and grades at which students drop out of school. Thus, dropping out could be prevented by providing suitable assistance in these specific grades. The results (especially for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school and 1<sup>st</sup> year of lower secondary school) overlap with those of previous studies. Therefore, it is important to provide economic support, such as scholarships, and study support during these particular school years.

Moreover, since it was found that the administrative, school and family factors had differential impacts, based on each village's specific context, it is necessary to provide educational assistance with respect to these factors.

This study has a major implication for practice (i.e., an alternative method of educating OOSCY), such as providing technical and vocational education (such as agricultural and mechanical education) at the local level. Since this kind of flexible education was observed to be beneficial, policies that meet the needs of OOSCY need to be expanded. In the Hmong village, as mentioned earlier, an international NGO has

employed young people (e.g., as kindergarten teachers) and provided them with stable salaries. Initiatives such as these, that ensure steady incomes, could encourage the local youth to continue studying, even after dropping out of school.

Making OOSCY return to school is not the only viable way, and other flexible policies, such as vocational education, are also worth discussing and examining.

### **Cooperation Between Different Sectors**

Niizeki (2017) finds it necessary to adopt broader views on the future of social and economic development, ethnic elements, and other secondary factors, with regard to education-related problems. Specifically, multi-directional and cross-sectoral approaches are required, with cooperation between the education sector and ministerial and public sectors from other fields. This requires finding ways and means to combine disparate aspects from across society; for example, for increasing the number of boarding houses, generating employment, offering vocational education, and teaching appropriate family planning. The last might also be effective for preventing fertility rates that perpetuate poverty.

As COVID-19 has pushed local governments into even more serious budget shortages, the author of this paper realizes that there are limitations to implementing different projects. However, existing networks can be utilized, and new ones created with aid from international institutes. This is a possible strategy for enabling villagers to

continue their education. The WFP's school feeding programs in the Lanten villages and Save the Children's teacher employment programs are leading examples. However, the biggest challenge is collaborating with micro-level institutions.

This paper shows that administrative, school, and family factors are all significant and impactful, and constitute the reasons for villagers not continuing their formal education. However, it is possible to achieve greater cooperation by capitalizing on each other's strengths. It is especially important for local governments to mount efforts in cooperation with international organizations, NGOs, and even organizations outside the education sector, while sharing information with families and schools.

### **Limitations of research**

There were limitations in this study noted by a blind reviewer that could be addressed in future research. First, the research focused on field studies, however, continuous data collection was limited due to COVID-19. In order to overcome the barrier, additional research was conducted by the research collaborator. However, collecting sufficient detailed evidence and data to support the discussion was not easy. Villagers in the target areas were reluctant to people accept from infected areas. As it will be hopefully easier to approach the field sites going forward, further research will be expected to be conducted in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to schools that do not have all the grades. In Laos, 19.1% of primary schools are classified as incomplete (Word Bank 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank (2017) Education Girls, Ending Child Marriage, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage> (Accessed November 20, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> The major achievements of this period are an increase in the education budget, enrollment at all education levels, and improved literacy rate. Moreover, reductions in gender disparity, repetition rates, and dropout rates were reported (Ministry of Education and Sports 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The Lanten are a subgroup of the Yao (also called Ewmien), comprising 3% of the population in the Luang Namtha Province (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Statistics Year Book 2012*, National Statistics Bureau (2013), Vientiane, Lao PDR.

<sup>6</sup> This is conducted under a WFP initiative, with funds provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Since 2006, they have been supporting the Lao PDR. In 2019, the WFP was supporting 137,567 school children in 41 districts of 10 provinces (WFP 2018, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The author of this paper had planned to visit the research sites for follow-up. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was entrusted to the research collaborator. As she was familiar with the villagers, she took a Wi-Fi router to the village and facilitated interviews via Zoom. This is how the author directly interviewed the village school director and a DESB staff member.

<sup>8</sup> A primary school was built in 1993, and those villagers who were 33 years and older at the time of this research (then six years old) could have gone to school.

<sup>9</sup> Children are also trained by parents to make needlework products.

<sup>10</sup> An additional inquiry made by a research collaborator in March 2021 confirmed the same trend in the villages. However, she mentioned that the older age group, such as the 50–70 years group, had married early.

<sup>11</sup> Tui said he could complete his master's degree in Vietnam because of a scholarship from the Vietnamese government.

<sup>12</sup> An additional inquiry made in March 2021 revealed that all primary school graduates proceeded to secondary school. Unlike the Hmong village, the Lanten village has a lower secondary school near to it. It takes about 15 minutes to reach by bicycle, and hence proceeding to secondary school is normal.

<sup>13</sup> This vocational training is offered from the vocational education budget (Inui 2020b).