

# Understanding the reasons why some children leave school early in Viet Nam

In order to meet its stated aim of transforming the country into a modern industrialised economy by 2020, the Government of Viet Nam has continued to prioritise education as a driving force for sustainable development, industrialisation and modernisation. However, despite great progress already achieved in the education sector, the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report in 2008 included Viet Nam among its list of ten countries with over 1 million school-age children who were not attending school. This is a cause for grave concern, particularly at lower secondary level, since missing this vital part of their education will affect children's chances for employment in non-agricultural jobs, and will also affect the future composition of the country's labour force. This Policy Brief uses longitudinal data from Young Lives to review which children were leaving before completing lower secondary school. This analysis suggests key reasons are children's academic performance and reported 'disinterest' in school. Other factors include household poverty, low parental education, and ethnic minority status. In contrast, support from family and friends and positive attention and encouragement from their teachers are important factors that discourage children from dropping out.

Viet Nam has made significant progress in achieving universal primary education. In 2009, net enrolment in primary school was 97% and 88.5% of children who start primary school complete five years of primary education. However, behind this bright picture the statistics also show that only 90% of children who complete primary school continued on to lower secondary school. According to UNESCO's 2008 Global Monitoring Report, the number of school-age children who were not attending school in Viet Nam was the highest in South-East Asia, and Viet Nam was among ten countries in the world with over one million out-of-school children. According to government statistics, 15.5% of children aged 5 to 18 in 2009 were not attending school (GSO 2011). Children in Viet Nam usually attend school from age 6 to 18, with 5 years in primary school, 4 years in lower secondary, and 3 years in upper secondary school, although only primary education is compulsory.

In order to meet the government's stated goal of becoming a modern industrialised economy by 2020, Viet Nam needs to raise levels of education and skills for its labour force to meet the demands of economic growth. Baulch et al. pointed out that: 'completing lower secondary schooling significantly increases labour market entrants' ability to gain employment in low-value manufacturing in Viet Nam', and that there is 'a real danger that a child who drops out from lower, and to a lesser extent upper secondary school, will be unable to obtain wage employment in the future' (Baulch et al. 2012:13). Given the slow increase in the number of workers educated to lower secondary level since 2002 and the target that 95% of children should be attending lower secondary school by 2020, it is important to understand why some children leave school early, since a better education is key to securing their future and ensuring sustainable poverty reduction across Viet Nam.

## Who leaves school early and what might help to keep them in school?

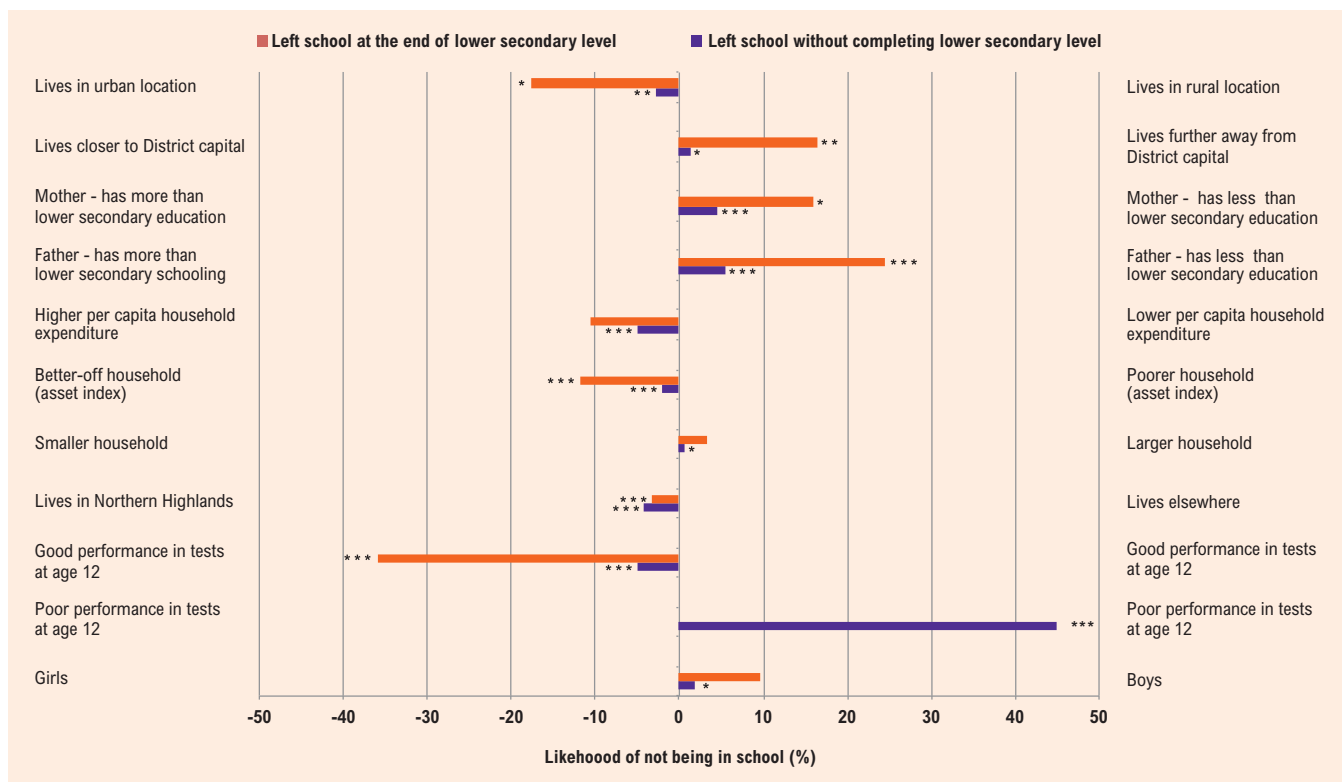
One in five (21%) of the older children interviewed in the third round of the Young Lives survey had left school between the ages of 12 and 15. Some groups are more likely to leave school than others:

- One in three children from the poorest households left school, compared to one in five children from less-poor families.
- Children in rural areas were twice as likely to leave school than children in urban areas (23% and 12% respectively).
- The number of children from ethnic minorities leaving school (37%) was much higher than Kinh and ethnic Chinese children (18%).
- How children did in school tests at age 12 was an important predictor of whether they would still be in school at age 15. This suggests that policies that support children to learn well early in their school lives would also help keep them in school.

## Factors that influence children's decision to leave before completing lower secondary school

Data on when and why children leave school is available from our household survey for both the Young Lives study children and their siblings. In addition, this policy brief will use data from in-depth qualitative interviews carried out in 2011 with 36 children to highlight the resilience factors that support children not to drop out of school early.

**Figure 1. What determines whether children leave school and when?**



\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

We found the following factors influenced whether children were more or less likely to leave school before completion of lower secondary school (controlling for other factors such as household wealth and gender):

### Key factor 1: Children who scored better in tests at 12, were more likely to be in school at 15

Using maths test scores and other indicators showed that poor performance in tests at age 12 years was a strong predictor of whether a child would leave school before completing lower secondary. Children who performed poorly in tests at age 12 were 40% more likely to leave school early. Measuring classroom performance in this way is important in explaining not only drop-out but also continuation to upper secondary school as children who performed above average at age 12 were 36% more likely to stay on.

### Key factor 2: Less poor children were more likely to be in school at 15 than poorer children

However measured, the better off a household is, the less likely the children are to leave school early. Even though it might be expected that a better-off household might have more land and more livestock so that children might be expected to work more and thus drop out of school to work, our analysis found that this is not the case. Children from families with more assets are less likely to leave school early.

### Key factor 3: Children with better-educated parents were more likely to be in school at 15

Children whose parents had not completed lower secondary school themselves are more likely to leave school early than their peers. If a child's father or mother did not complete lower secondary, this increases the chances that the child also will leave school early. Mothers' levels of education have greater impact on ethnic minority children, perhaps because mothers with more education are better equipped to support their children's schooling.

### Key factor 4: Where children live affects their chances of staying in school

The likelihood of leaving school increases if children live further away and it takes longer to travel from home to school. This is especially true for remote communities where roads and public transport are poor. Distance is also an important factor in the cost of education for children from remote communities. The distance from the child's home to the district capital is proportionate to the risk of dropping out.

### Key factor 5: Ethnic minority status was associated with children being more likely to have left school at age 15

Children from ethnic minorities were more likely to have left school early. However, among the children who completed lower secondary, there is no ethnic gap with respect to leaving school straight after Grade 9.

### Reasons given by caregivers for children leaving school

Of the Young Lives children and their siblings aged between 6 and 17, 459 children had already left school (9.6%). Of these, two in five (39%) had done so because of losing interest in school. Our analysis shows two important factors related to reported 'disinterest' in school: caregiver's low level of education and ethnic minority status of the child. While we find no relationship between disinterest in school and poverty, minority group status and having less educated parents are both themselves associated with lower wealth levels.

Caregivers also report the main reason for children leaving school is their children's disinterest in school. The scenarios they recount leading to loss of interest in school include the child finding classes too boring because of poor teaching, or that the child could not follow what was taught in the class, or that the child's performance was poor. Even if the class was not boring, a child may see no benefit from education given his/her socio-economic background and the available opportunities for future employment. Disinterest in schooling, therefore, also reflects a child's perception about the value of the education.

Two other reasons most referred by parents were first that the child was needed to work in the household, doing farm work, herding, or other tasks (18% of children), and second the direct cost of education, including that 'fees are too expensive' and 'books and/or other supplies are too expensive' (9.6% of children). In brief, poverty affects child drop-out in two ways: children leave school to do work supporting their families, and children have to leave school because their families are unable to cover the costs of their education.

#### Ho Nit: an ethnic minority girl who left school aged 10

Ho Nit, a Cham H'roi girl, was born in a family where most members haven't completed secondary school: her father had left school after Grade 6, her mother after Grade 2, and her brothers Grade 9 and 5, and almost all of her friends had already left school. Ho Nit herself was determined she wanted to leave school after Grade 4. She cannot read or write in Vietnamese, and does not have any notion of time. "The letters know her but she doesn't know the letters," were the words her mother used to describe Ho Nit's inability to remember what she was taught. Ho Nit's father gave no other reason for Ho Nit dropping out but her inability to follow the class, and he gave the same explanation for her siblings. Her father greatly appreciated her significant support for the family: "She does all the housework, from grazing the oxen and pigs, to cooking for the family and others." Her inability to follow lessons and her contribution to the household led her parents to agree with her decision to leave school.

Source: adapted from Le Thuc Duc and Tran Ngo Minh Tam (2012) *Why Children in Viet Nam Drop out of Schools and What They Do after That?*

Of all the children who had left school before completing lower secondary (279 of the 459 Young Lives children and their siblings up to age 17), half (47%) said it was because of disinterest. Therefore, by implication, although a very important factor, disinterest in school was not the main reason for more than half the children leaving school early.

### Factors helping to make children more resilient

Our in-depth interviews with 12 of the Young Lives children aged 16 and 17 (7 of whom had already left school) illustrates why some children in difficult circumstances drop out while others in similar conditions do not.

First of all, children who drop out often share these some common characteristics: living in poor households with non-supportive parents who have little or no education, they may have a brother or sister who has also dropped out, friends who have dropped out, and they have poor school records. On the other hand, there are other children who were also born in poor families, or who failed the tenth grade entrance exam for upper secondary school, or were involved in disruptive behaviour and faced expulsion, but who stayed in school, because they had the care, support and trust of their parents and teachers. These are critical factors in helping children develop their resilience; in particular, having a positive role model from a sibling is important in encouraging children to strive for similar success.

#### Lien: a resilient school attendee

Lien failed her high school entrance exam in 2009 even though she was the class monitor and had very good aptitude for studying. Failing the exam was a big shock and she started a part-time job sewing shopping bags for an international company to save money to study further. In 2010, she re-sat and passed the entrance exam for upper secondary school and felt very happy and proud of herself. She gained more self-confidence than her previous shy and introverted character. She also received a bicycle from her father as a reward for passing the exam. She felt she has finally overcome the biggest shock in her life so far and has fitted in well in her new learning environment with her new teachers and friends. She still works part-time as way to increase her family income so has little time for studying, sometimes as little as 30 minutes per day. Her academic results are currently not as good as when she was in primary and lower secondary school, but Lien has decided that she will study hard in eleventh grade to try to pass the university entrance exam.

Source: adapted from Vu Thi Thanh Huong (2011) 'Understanding Resilience, Risk, and Protection in the Light of School Attendance and Drop-out'

### Policy implications: keeping children in school

Evidence from Young Lives suggests that leaving school before completion of lower secondary school is a common phenomenon. This is a loss to both the individual child and to society and so finding ways to retain children in school should be a priority for policymakers. Our analysis of the determinants and reasons for drop-out shows that children's classroom performance is a key factor. Therefore policy efforts to improve early learning and performance may help to create a virtuous circle, keeping children in school for longer. Other factors linked with children leaving school early including coming from poorer backgrounds, having parents with little or no education, and ethnic minority status.

The main reason that parents give for their children leaving school is that the child has lost interest in studying and going to school. However, this loss of interest may say something important about children's daily experience of schooling (for example if they are not doing well or feel excluded), and that positive experiences may help keep children in school. While we find no relationship between disinterest in school and poverty, coming from an ethnic minority or having less educated parents are both themselves associated with lower household wealth. Disinterest in schooling may also reflect children and caregivers' perceptions about the value of education and its potential to improve their lives.

Children today are our future tomorrow. The goal of becoming an industrialised country by 2020 can only be realised if Viet Nam can generate enough skilled workers to meet the demand of the future modern economy. To achieve this requires adequate investment in children's education. Minimising, and then eliminating, drop-out in lower secondary school is critical for two reasons. First, a completed school education is a prerequisite for

further vocational training. Second, children who leave school early are not likely to resume their education in the future.

In order to prevent this, in addition to the poverty reduction policies and policies to support children in remote areas with difficult conditions currently being implemented by the Government, there is need to focus on improving the environment, both within the household and at school, in order to raise children's interest in learning while creating a protective barrier to encourage them to study as well and as long as they can.

Children who leave school early are likely to be excluded from the labour market in the future. The fact that technical and vocational schools currently cannot recruit sufficient students means that they will be unable to supply the skilled workforce Viet Nam needs (Viet Nam Business Forum 2012), and the limited work opportunities available to children who leave school early implies a mismatch in the enrolment strategies of technical and vocational schools. This calls for measures such as expanding access to vocational training by targeting early school leavers as potential applicants. Providing supplementary courses to help children to complete lower secondary schooling in parallel with the normal curriculum at vocational school may be a good option in this case.

To stop children from leaving in the middle of their schooling and to create opportunities for those who do so will ensure a better future for all children. Our analysis suggests that addressing both how well children are doing early in their school careers and how they feel about their school experience may help keep them in school for longer. Better education for poorer children will also pave the way to breaking the intergenerational poverty cycle and ensuring a sustainable reduction of poverty. At the same time, improving workforce skills and quality will provide a solid foundation for Viet Nam's economy to move up to a higher step in the manufacturing sector and avoid the middle income trap.

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