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Understanding resilience, risk, and protection in the light of school attendance and dropout: A comparative cross-case analysis of qualitative data in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper asks the following question “Why do some children drop out halfway through school while others, with similar backgrounds and conditions, do not?”. A comparative cross-case study based on qualitative data collected from 12 children aged 16-17, their caregivers, friends, teachers and community people in two villages in Vietnam is used to examine the factors influencing children’s different pathways through high school. Using the resilience framework, both the risk and protective factors at the individual, family, friendship, and school levels pertaining to these high school attendees and drop-outs will be explored. The study suggests that the presence of certain protective factors might have helped some children overcome the adversity of their situation and continue high school, while the presence of certain risk factors might have discouraged other children, having contributed to their inability to develop resilience. Differences among gender and ethnic groups will be discussed and implications for parents and educators will also be drawn.

Key words: children, school dropout, resilience, risk, protective factors, Vietnam

Over the past 50 years, Vietnam has achieved great successes in education: if in 1945 more than 95% of the adult population was illiterate, that had been reversed in 2006 with nearly 93% of the adult population literate (World Bank, 2009). Yet behind these achievements there are concerns: In 2006, out of all Kinhⁱ and Chinese/Hoa children, 97% were enrolled in primary school, 93% in lower secondary school, and 70% in high school. By comparison, ethnic minority had 90% in primary, 81% in secondary and only 44% in high school (VHLSS, 2006). Statistics have shown that the dropout rates are particularly high among teenagers aged 12 to 16ⁱⁱ and dropout occurs during the transition from primary school (grades 1-5) to lower secondary (grades 6-9), and from lower secondary to upper secondary (grades 10-12) (SAVY, 2005). The 2009 survey of 951 Young Lives children aged around 15 shows that about 22% of them are no longer in school. The rates for ethnic minority children are almost 50% (Vietnam Young Lives Round 3 Country report, 2011).

Children's dropping out of school has been a serious concern for parents, educators, and the public alike because they believe in its negative consequences. Unlike most past researches that have focused on identifying who are at risk of dropping out of school and why, this study makes an attempt to understand why some children drop out halfway through high school while others, with similar background and situations, do not. By comparing the experiences of the school attendees and the school dropouts, the study hopes to reveal how some children learn to display the resilience that has enabled them to cope with the difficulties of their lives and keep going to school. The paper is organized into 5 sections. The first section presents the background of the study where previous researches on school dropouts in Vietnam are reviewed. The second section presents the resilience framework. The third section describes the research methods. The next section presents the results of the analyses and the final section concludes with some implications.

Background

The issue of children's dropping out of school has attracted the attention of many Vietnamese researchers. Most researches have focused on answering the question "Who is likely to drop out and why?" and have suggested a set of characteristics of dropouts. A number of researches have confirmed that family's socioeconomic background is an important factor accounting for children's dropping out: better off families invest more in their children's education (Knodel & Jones, 1996; Hoang Gia Trang, 2001; Do Thien Kinh, 2005; Ha Thi Minh Khuong, 2006) and have lower rates of dropouts as compared to poor families (Nguyen Thi Van Anh & Le Khanh, 2000; Vo Thanh Son et al., 2001 among others). The 2006 MIC survey found significant regional and ethnic disparity in completion rates for both primary and secondary education, with ethnic minority children abandoning school halfway through significantly more often than Kinh/Hoa children (GSO & UNICEF, 2007). Besides the household economic status, this study also found that mother's education has a significant impact on children's secondary school attendance. Recent researches using Young Lives data also confirm these trends of association between household economic-ethnic status, the mother's education, and the children's enrolment rates at secondary school (Vietnam YL country report, 2011; Truong Huyen Chi, 2009).

The following key barriers have been suggested by some qualitative studies to account for the low rates of transition from primary to secondary school among ethnic minority children, particularly girls: households' economic and financial difficulties, the need to work, the poor quality of teaching and learning at school, inadequate school infrastructure, parents' and girls' perceptions of the values of educating girls, the long distance from the village to the school, poor school performance, poor Vietnamese skills of many ethnic minority children, and poor teaching skills, the customs of avoiding thunders, lightning, wind, rats and tigers, the customs of having girls engaged early in domestic chores and responsibilities and getting marriage early (MOET, UNICEF, UNESCO, 2008; Save the Children, 2009; Nguyen Phuong Thao, 2006). These barriers have been found to be manifested and experienced differently in different ethnic groups and they tend to be interlinked in complex, non-linear ways.

Although researchers have offered various explanations for the low rates of transition from primary to secondary school, no research has ever examined the resilience of children who, despite the adversity of their circumstances, continue to go to school.

Resilience framework

Resilience is a multifaceted field of study and has been used by many researchers as a useful analytical construct to study children who live in adversity (Werner E., 2011). There exists no single definition of resilience. As a working definition, this study adopts a definition of resilience given by Michael Ungarⁱⁱⁱ, according to which resilience is better understood as follows:

“In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.”

This definition emphasizes both the processes and the outcomes of resilience: it is both the successful navigation to resources and the negotiation of resources to be provided in meaningful ways and as such it is both culturally and collectively embedded. The concept of resilience is often linked with the notions of risk and protective factors. Risk and protective factors are variables that shift individuals' development pathways: risks increase negative outcomes and protective factors promote positive outcomes (Reis et al; 2005). Risks describe the conditions or personal characteristics that are associated with an elevating probability of undesired outcome. Protective factors are “either individual or environmental characteristics that facilitate better outcomes in people at risk or exposed to adversity” (Masten, 1994).

Applying the resilience framework to qualitatively examine the resilience of academically students who achieve or underachieved in school in the United States of America, Reis et al. (ibid) found that resilience seemed to develop from a combination of specific personal, environmental, and social issues. The talented students who achieve at school display positive personal characteristics such as belief in self, determination, motivation, constructive use of time, the ability to work hard in honor classes, extra-curricular activities, and sports. The study also suggests one necessary protective factor for achievement to occur and resilience to develop is the presence of at least one supportive adult. The underachieving students are found to have had some unhappy

childhood experiences and little support from adults, which may have contributed to their inability to develop resilience. The study found that the risk factors that may have thwarted the development of resilience were: the absence of positive peer support, siblings who drop out of school, the absence of positive adult role models, lack of involvement in an elementary or middle school gifted program.

Methods

This study was guided by one general question: “Why do some children drop out halfway through school while others, with similar backgrounds and conditions, do not?” To answer this general question we ask the following specific research questions:

1. Why do children drop out from high school?
2. What factors contribute to their inability to develop resilience and what factors contribute to the development of at-risk students’ resilience?
3. Do these factors differ in different gender and ethnic groups?

The data were gathered from 12 Young Lives children aged 16-17 (6 boys and 6 girls) in two Young Lives qualitative research sites, VN022 and VN003^{iv}, by 2 teams of 10 field researchers working continuously in the field for 17 days during April 2011. During this time, group activities and discussions, in-depth interviews and observation data were collected from the children, their caregivers, siblings, other relatives, friends and teachers in their homes, at school, at workplaces and in the local social settings. A descriptive cross-case content analysis was used to analyze the data and composites of case studies resulted in descriptors of factors contributing to the development of children’s resilience (protective factors) or to their inability to develop resilience (risks).

Among the 12 studied children, there are 6 boys and 6 girls, 4 are Cham H’roi^v and the remaining are Kinh. The economic statuses of their families are various ranging from better-off to poor^{vi}. The following brief profiles of 2 children will provide examples of school dropouts (non-resilient) and school attendees (resilient).

Lien^{vii}. Lien looks older than her age and seems to be an introverted girl. Her mother says she is often shy when meeting someone for the first time. However, when she has become more acquainted with that person, she starts to talk more. Lien does not often smile or laugh. Her voice is a little bit low. Lien has a very good working attitude; she works hard, is focused, careful, and rarely compares herself with others when she is given more housework. In 2009, she failed the high school entrance exam even though she was the class monitor and had very good study aptitude. Failing the exam was a big shock for her. However, she tried to work a part time job (sewing bags) in order to make money to study further. In 2010, she finally passed the entrance exam to V.G. high school. When she passed the exam, Lien felt very happy and proud of herself. She also gained more self-confidence. Lien’s father bought her a bicycle to travel to the new school as a reward for passing the exam. This is a very meaningful gift for her. She has finally overcome the biggest shock in life so far and has integrated well into the new study environment with her new teachers and friends. She has a lot of friends and she highly appreciates the simplicity in their friendship. Lien’s form teacher said that she is a very enthusiastic and goal oriented student. Lien loves her siblings very much and she always shows great respect for her parents and grandparents. She always shows her care for others in a subtle way. She keeps a part time job, sewing bags, in order to increase

her family income. Lien spends very little time studying. Every day she spends as little as 30 minutes, sometimes an hour to study at home. Her academic results are currently not as good as they were in primary and lower secondary school. This can be contributed to her “relaxing after passing the exam” mood. However, Lien has decided that she would study harder in her 11th grade in order to pass the university entrance exam.

Y Mich. Y Mich is the youngest child in a Cham H'roi family. He has two sisters and one brother. The two sisters are currently married. The brother is 22 years old, and left school when he was in grade 9. He now stays at home and works as a farmer. Y Mich finished grade 9 last year (2010) and should be in grade 10 by now, but he decided to leave school earlier this year. His decision made his parents very angry and unhappy because they wanted him to pursue further education in order to be able to get a job at the Commune's People Committee. No one in his family knows why he left school. He is considered to be a shy and quiet person, he has never told his problems to anyone in his family. Up to now, his family's main occupation has been farming. However, his family is considered one of the best-off families in the village. Since he left school, his family has acquired new farming land. Every day, he goes to the new farming land with his brother to learn farming techniques. However, he says that farming is a hard job, and he wants to find another way to earn a living, such as truck driving and transporting sugarcane.

Results

Why do children drop out of school?

Seven (4 boys and 3 girls) out of the twelve children in our sample have left school between the 3rd and the 10th grades. Various reasons have been cited to account for their decision to leave school. For the Kinh children, the dominant reason keeping them from continuing their schooling is their failure at the 10th grade entrance exam. For the ethnic minority children, the reasons are more diverse and not so straightforward. Y Mich was one of the very few Cham H'roi children in his community who got placed in the 10th grade, but after two weeks sitting in the new class he decided to quit forever. School became “boring” for Y Mich because none of the friends he knew were in the same class with him. By the time the research was conducted in his commune, Y Mich and his friends were busy chopping sugarcane to make money to satisfy their daily alcohol drinking habit. For Y Think, his school memories were full of fights against his classmates' ridiculing his “ethnic minority” origin. He often missed classes which made him fall far behind, and ultimately led to his decision to leave school. Ho Mai left school in grade 6 because she felt shame for not being able to buy a bicycle to go to school. Of all these 7 dropouts, Ho Nit has the fewest memories of her schooling experiences, as she left in grade 3. Her parents did not let her continue schooling because they thought she was slow and not good at learning. “The letters know her but she does not know the letters” are the words her mother used to describe her apparent inability to remember what she was taught.

Factors contributing to the at-risk children's inability to develop resilience

As with previous studies, the family's economic status continues to be found a risk factor for some children's schooling. Lanh had been a good student for many years but her performance was not so good in grade 9 and she failed at the 10th grade entrance

exam because she did not have the money to go to exam preparation classes nor the time to prepare for it at home. Lanh could have taken the exam the second time and indeed she wanted to, but her mother would not let her. Having finished the 7th grade and being a farmer herself, Lanh's mother did not believe that her daughter could pass the 10th grade exam and even if she did pass the 10th grade exam, she believed that her daughter would fail the university entrance exam anyways. Lack of respect for her daughter's intellectual ability and low expectations for her future is also evident in our conversations with Ho Nit's mother. Having had very little education and being a farmer herself, Ho Nit's mother projected her life onto her daughter when she was asked what she would like her daughter to be: "She'll work in the family's farms. We've been doing farming all our lives. We know nothing else!" In some cases, having a brother or a sister who also dropped out of school seemed to have a strong impact on the child's decision to leave school, as illustrated by the example of Hung, who was determined that he would rather work as a construction worker like his brother.

Lack of high aspiration and self-belief is a characteristics quite common in many dropouts. Quoc is pleased with his current job as a low paid worker at a workshop in his village. He has no other dreams and he thought of his decision to leave school as the very right one because "most people drop out of school. Even those who already attend the 10th grade also drop out". For the young Cham H'roi girls and boys, education is a waste as they all end up working in their farms: "It makes no difference whether I go to school or not" was Y Think's reply to his parents' insistence on his continuing school. Everyone in the village knows the story of a girl in their village, who has a college education and was in love with a man from a Kinh majority. The girl's parents did not agree for their daughter to marry that man. She returned to her village, married a Cham H'roi man, works in her family farms and herds the buffaloes like everyone else in the village who have no or little education. More than that, the girls in the village seem to sincerely believe that a Cham Hroi man will not marry a Cham H'roi girl who has attained an education level higher than his own. And for them, getting married is an aspiration of their lives.

School experiences have proven to be critical in children's decision to discontinue their schooling. All school dropouts reported they found school and learning boring: It is boring because they do not understand the lessons and cannot perform as well as expected. This is particularly true for the Cham H'roi children. The teaching and learning at school is conducted in a language (Vietnamese) that they do not use at home and in their community. As recalled by Ho Nit, she could understand nothing when she was in grade 1, and began to understand very little when she was in grade 2 and 3. Her illiterate parents could not help her. The hard-pressed teachers could not help her because there were so many children in the class and they did not have time for mentoring students individually. As the students move to higher grades, the gaps in their knowledge and academic skills become wider and learning becomes more and more difficult.

Ethnic minority children have been excluded from class activities both by the existing teaching strategies and by the unwelcoming attitudes of their Kinh classmates. Y Think decided to leave school because he was tired of being disciplined by the school for his disruptive behavior. He would rather not go to school than swallow the resentfulness of being despised by his Kinh classmates. For Y Mich, his dreams and excitement seemed to quickly fade away when he realized that none of his friends were around him

in the new school. He was so disappointed when his request to be moved to another class with his old friends was turned down. Had the school rules be more supportive of ethnic minority children, had the form teacher be more sensitive to his psychology, Y Mich's experiences of his transition to high school might have not been so frightening and he might not have disrupted his education so prematurely.

In their accounts for the increasing rates of high school dropouts in their communities and schools, many caregivers and teachers have mentioned peer pressure. Many dropouts have friend groups composed of other dropouts. These children are often encouraged to skip school to play videogames by friends, which leads to a gaming addiction and low academic results. These behaviors often eventually result in dropping out of school. Young Cham H'roi boys often adopt the liquor drinking pattern of adults in their community. To afford liquor, many have dropped out of school and taken up jobs as sugarcane choppers. This easy way of earning cash has distracted boys from their schoolwork: the boys can only see the immediate monetary gains in front of their eyes. As Y Mich says "Going to school does not generate me any money. Only by chopping sugarcane can I have the money to drink alcohol as much as I want". Similarly, following the footsteps of their mothers and sisters, Cham H'roi girls want to drop out and get married early. As reported in a community group discussion, when some parents opposed their children's decision to get married early, some children threatened suicide, forcing their parents to agree: "Nowadays we cannot impose on our children what we want them to do. Instead they impose on us what they want".

We have seen so far that factors pertaining to children's personal attributes, their family backgrounds, school and friends all have influenced children's decisions to leave school early. These factors often appear together, depend on each other, one leading to another. For example, a child might have low academic results because he plays truant too much, and he eventually drops out because of his low academic results.

Factors contributing to the development of resilience

Not every child who failed the 10th grade entrance exams easily gave up their education dreams, and not all children born in poor families succumb to their disadvantages by curtailing their education early. A comparison of school dropouts and school attendees has shown that the school attendees have some distinctive characteristics which might have protected them from leaving school.

First of all, all school attendees have very supportive parents. Lien came from a big family with poor parents but they set high expectations for their children and support them strongly, and her older sister, who was admitted to one of the universities in Hanoi was a good example for her. That is why Lien decided to take the 10th grade entrance exam the second time and she succeeded. The parents of other school attendees also highly appreciate the values of education and are determined to invest in their children's education as long as they can. Quoc's mother, knowing the price she has paid for her lack of education, dreams that both of her children graduate from universities and have good careers. Quoc's maternal uncle also played a big role in shaping his education pathway. Once Quoc was addicted to online games and involved in fighting with his classmates to the extent that he dared not return to class and was faced with expulsion. His uncle arranged for Quoc to stay with his family, move Quoc to another school and mentored him to continue schooling until he entered grade 10. His sister, a second year student at a

famous university in Hanoi, has also supported Quoc in any way she can to make sure that her brother learns well at school.

The school attendees themselves have some personal attributes which are distinctive from those of school dropouts. If most school dropouts are not confident in their intellectual abilities, see little or no value in their education, and have no big dreams for their future, school attendees tend to be confident and have high dreams for their future. They are also self-disciplined and capable of making the right decision. Understanding that she has spent not enough time on studying at home as a result of her “relaxing after passing the exam” mood, Lien has decided that she would study harder in her 11th grade in order to pass the university entrance exam.

Unlike school dropouts, most school attendees have positive attitudes towards their school and learning. They like school, are interested in learning, and take part in many sports and extra-curricular activities at school. They also report that they have been supported by their teachers and friends in their classes. Knowing that Lien’s family is poor, her form teacher has reduced the fees so that Lien can join extra classes like her other students. Being well aware of his past online game addiction and fighting history, Quoc’s new form teacher has closely supervised him, reminding him to prepare lessons and follow class rules, keeping an eye on who he is hanging out with. Having a girl friend who is highly motivated and studies hard also helps Quoc a lot in his studying. Quoc has confessed that he is no more afraid of the English subject and he has attributed this change to the support he got from his girlfriend.

Discussion and implications

This qualitative comparative analysis of school attendees’ and dropouts’ experiences has highlighted a number of differences in their family backgrounds, personal attributes, school experiences, and peer relationships. Like with previous researches on dropouts, the study has found the following characteristics of high school dropouts: living in poor households with non-supportive parents who have little or no education, having a brother or a sister who has dropped out, having friend groups who are other dropouts, and having poor school records. If Kinh children have left school mainly because they failed the 10th grade entrance exam, ethnic minority children have been found to leave school much earlier, more often, and for various reasons: because they were bored sitting in class without being able to understand the lesson and therefore to fully participate in it; because they were not welcomed by their classmates, or were involved in disruptive behavior; or because they were frustrated with the school rules. These ethnic minority children, both boys and girls, following the footprints of their parents, their older sisters, brothers, and friends, would rather be housewives, farmers, or sugarcane choppers than strive to get out of poverty through education.

There are other children in our sample who were also born in poor families and failed the 10th grade entrance exam, or were involved in disruptive behavior and were faced with an expulsion from school. However, these children kept on going to school. A comparison of these students and the dropouts has revealed some important differences. Parental and teachers’ care, support and clearly stated high expectations have been found to be critical factors in helping these children develop their resilience. Having a positive role model from a sibling has proven important in encouraging these children to strive for similar success. These children also displayed some personal

attributes which set them apart from the dropouts: they are self-confident, have high aspirations, good attitudes towards school and learning and are well-disciplined.

Notwithstanding some limitations (Boyden & Man, 2005; Boyden & Cooper, 2007), resilience has been found in this study a useful analytical construct to study children's educational pathways. The findings consistent with past research could be used to draw implications for parents, educators and policy makers. The message underlying these findings is that there are important factors pertaining to the family background, the child's personal attributes, school environment and peer relationships which could be promoted to protect the children from dropping out. The parents, educators and policy makers should be aware of these factors and try to help children develop those needed qualities and provide an environment at home and at school favorable for developing those qualities. Parents should understand that they can help their children by supporting them and clearly expressing their high expectations. Schools should have instructional strategies and structural policies that take into account the distinctive psychological traits of different groups of children and that help promote their motivation to go to school. Finally, parents and teachers should pay a special attention to the friend groups their children hang out with. This study, however, does not claim that the children who seem to be resilient in their school transition, are necessarily resilient in the other aspects of their lives, nor claim that these children will continue to be resilient in the future. Our longitudinal research will allow us to observe the development of the resilience traits of these children over time.

ⁱ The majority ethnic group in Vietnam

ⁱⁱ According to Vietnam's law, primary education (grades 1-5) is obligatory for children aged 6-14

ⁱⁱⁱ Resilience Research Center, at <http://www.resilienceproject.org/>

^{iv} VN022 is a rural commune in the North of Vietnam, about 25 km away from Hanoi. VN003 is a rural commune in the central highlands where the Kinh and the Cham H'roi (an ethnic minority group) cohabit.

^v This is one among the 53 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam

^{vi} According to the quintile index of the Young Lives Round 3 survey.

^{vii} All the persons' names are pseudonyms.

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