CHAPTER FOUR

SCHOOLING AND TRANSITION TO WORK

Figure 4.1 Faces of the future – primary school students from Village A2 on their way home from school. Primary schools are now easily accessible for most children in the study area, except for some Dao and Hmong.

Past studies indicate that one of the root causes of the underdevelopment of ethnic minorities in Vietnam lies in their lack of adequate educational preparation, which affects their transitions to adulthood and their well-being throughout the life course. This chapter addresses the process of educational attainment and transition from school to work among young people, particularly ethnic minorities, in two mountainous communities in Vietnam’s Northern Uplands. The first part of the chapter provides an analytical overview of educational provision in the study area; describes differentials in educational preparation across cohorts as well as across ethnic groups; and delineates factors that explain these differentials. In particular, we examine what prompts some students in remote areas to remain in school and what leads others to drop out. We also address the effects of educational assistance under Vietnam’s targeted poverty reduction schemes on young people’s educational outcomes.

The second part of the chapter describes various pathways that these young people take after leaving school and entering full-time work. We illustrate differentials in transitions from school to work across ethnic groups. We attempt to understand why some young people never move away from their villages and what kind of economic opportunities are available to them. We also examine factors that influence other young people to migrate and try to understand what makes some migrant workers successful in finding a lucrative job in urban areas or
overseas, and why many fail. The impact of poverty reduction programs in shaping young people’s transitions to the role of economic providers is discussed.

**Educational Provision in the Study Area**

All schools in Vo Nhai District are public and thus are administered and financed by the Department of Education and Training (DOET). Figure 4.2 illustrates how each level of schooling in the district is administered. While the district’s DOET is in charge of the provision of kindergarten, primary, and lower-secondary levels of schooling, three schools providing upper-secondary education and a special lower-secondary program for talented ethnic minority students are under the direct supervision of Thai Nguyen Province’s DOET.

**Figure 4.2.** Administration of public schools in Vo Nhai District, Thai Nguyen Province.

Kindergartens and primary schools are easily accessible for most students in the study area, with the exception of some Dao and Hmong. The schools in both clusters have recently been renovated– in 2005-6 for Cluster A and 2006-7 for Cluster B. They now boast a two-storey building where classrooms are located and feature other amenities including bathrooms, playgrounds, and offices for teachers. Classes from kindergarten through 5th grade are offered.

According to the household survey, average distances to the nearest primary school range from 1.3 kilometers among sample Kinh households to 2.9 kilometers among the Hmong households. These estimates are comparable to the national averages of 1.4 kilometers for Kinh-Chinese households and 2.0 kilometers for ethnic minority households based on the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (Baulch et al. 2004). Primary-school students usually walk to school with other children from their villages. Although motorbike ownership in the study area has become increasingly common, parents do not usually give their young children a ride to school.
Figure 4.3. The primary school in Cluster A catering to both Kinh and Dao students in the study area has recently been renovated with financial assistance from one of Vietnam’s targeted poverty reduction schemes.

Figure 4.4. In the satellite primary school in the most remote Dao village, classrooms usually have very basic furniture and are in need of renovation.

Unlike a majority of students in the study area, children from the most remote Dao village and the Hmong village do not enjoy the same amenities and facilities that are offered at the newly renovated primary schools. Because of the remote location of their villages, the Dao and Hmong children attend the 1st to 3rd grades at satellite schools located in their villages. In the case of Dao students in Village A5, their satellite school is deteriorating. Built in a makeshift manner, the classrooms have dirt floors, a thatched roof, and a few pieces of worn furniture. They do not have adequate lighting, and the classrooms are not well-equipped to handle the weather in monsoon or winter seasons. Teachers assigned to the satellite schools are usually not from ethnic minority groups. They usually live elsewhere (e.g., in the center of the commune) and commute to the school at the beginning of the week and return home on Thursday or Friday. At the beginning of each academic year, teachers in Phuong Giao are assigned in rotation to teach at the satellite school. Teachers are reportedly reluctant to take up the assignment. After finishing the 3rd grade at the satellite school, minority children have to transfer to the 4th grade at the main primary schools, located at a distance of 8 kilometers via a mountainous road in the case of Dao students from Village A5 and about 5 kilometers in the case of Hmong students in Cluster B.

From the 6th to 9th grades students in Cluster A attend Phuong Giao’s only lower-secondary school near the commune center. The school was upgraded in 2003 and now has improved physical infrastructure such as two three-storey buildings, a dining area, and bicycle parking areas. Compared to the primary school, the lower-secondary school is less accessible to students from Cluster A because of the distance and road conditions. According to the household survey, the average distance to the school is 5 kilometers among sample Kinh households and 7 kilometers among the Dao households. Students usually walk or bike to school. It takes about 45 minutes to commute in one direction. The lower-secondary school in
Cluster B is more easily accessible than in Cluster A. This is particularly true for Kinh students who live near the Dong Bo market. The school shares some of its facilities with the primary school. Despite the convenience, one of the downsides for students in Cluster B is a constant lack of classrooms. Currently, the school deals with this issue by shuffling class schedules. For example, classes for primary-level students take place in the morning and those for lower-secondary level are offered in the afternoon.

Before 2006, Dinh Ca was the only place in Vo Nhai District where students could attend the 10th to 12th grades (upper-secondary school). Since 2006, this level of schooling has been offered at two additional schools in Trang Xa and Cuc Duong Commune. Dinh Ca has two upper-secondary schools. The first admits students who completed the 9th grade and passed an entrance examination. Organized as a continuation or “bo tuc” program, the second school is less selective in its admission requirements. Students attending upper-secondary schools in Dinh Ca are from all over Vo Nhai District. They usually stay in Dinh Ca during weekdays and return home on the weekend.

According to the household survey, an average distance from sample households in Cluster B to the nearest upper-secondary school is 12 kilometers for Kinh and 14 kilometers for Hmong. Students from Cluster A commute a much longer distance – about 20-25 kilometers in one direction. The usual means of transportation for students in both clusters is by bicycle. It takes about an hour for students from Cluster B and two hours for those from Cluster A to travel from home to upper-secondary school.

In addition to the regular schooling system (the 1st to 12th grades), two other educational programs are available in the study area. The first program is a special lower-secondary boarding school for talented ethnic minority students. Located in Dinh Ca, the school is known as the Ethnic Minority Boarding School (or Truong hoc noi chu) (see Box 4.1). The school represents one of the government’s efforts to bridge the educational gap between Kinh and ethnic minorities. One of the school’s main objectives is to give ethnically sensitive, high-quality secondary education to outstanding minority students from remote mountainous areas. Students are admitted to the school based on nominations from commune-level governments in Vo Nhai District and nearby mountainous districts. Theoretically, the nominations are based on students’ ethnicity (having at least one minority parent), remote residence, study performance, and parents’ socioeconomic background. Children of disabled war veterans receive admission preference. Many minority parents in the study area hope that their children have an opportunity to study at the Ethnic Minority Boarding School because the teaching quality is relatively high and all expenses (room and board included) are highly subsidized. However, to date, only a handful of minority students have been admitted to this school.
Box 4.1: Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools

Ethnic minority boarding schools (known in Vietnamese as Truong hoc noi chu) were established by the government of Vietnam throughout the country to provide high-quality secondary education for students of ethnic minority background. Tuition, room and board, and other fees are heavily subsidized by the government.

In Dinh Ca, an ethnic minority boarding school was established in the mid-1990s to provide lower-secondary education (i.e., from the 6th to 9th grades) for outstanding ethnic minority students in Vo Nhai as well as nearby districts.* Students admitted to this school must have a father or mother who is legally classified as non-Kinh.

In theory, ethnic minority students admitted to the school are considered “the cream of the crop.” In practice, each commune’s People’s Committee nominates a few eligible students to attend the school. Preference is given to children of veterans, particularly disabled ones, and children of commune cadres. Disadvantaged ethnic groups such as Hmong and Dao are more likely to be selected to attend the school than better-off groups such as Tay and Nung. Students who are half-ethnic minority must score high marks on annual exams in order to be admitted to the ethnic minority boarding school.

Admission to the school is highly competitive since the demand is great for very limited seats. Parents in the study areas mention the superior qualification of teachers in ethnic minority boarding schools, compared to regular public schools. The teaching strategies are also believed to better address the needs of ethnic minority students. Once students are accepted to the boarding school in Dinh Ca, it will be easy for them upon graduation to transfer to the ethnic minority boarding school in Thai Nguyen City, which offers upper-secondary schooling. Moreover, impressively high proportions of students from this school could also gain admission to good universities in Thai Nguyen and Hanoi.

* Two other ethnic minority boarding schools in Thai Nguyen Province are located in Phu Luong District (providing lower-secondary education) and in Thai Nguyen City (providing upper-secondary education).

The second educational program offers adult education courses. The classes are offered periodically in the study area by Vo Nhai District’s DOET. This program gives a second chance to learn for out-of-school youth and adults who have never been to school. Classes under this program are usually free of charge and offered in the evening. The adult education program focuses on building literacy skills such as reading and writing and basic mathematics. While ethnic minority young people whom we interviewed express keen interests in attending these classes, the program are not very successful in the study villages. Only a small number of adult students graduated in the past, and dropout rates are high.

Beyond the 12th grade, no institutions in Vo Nhai District currently offer tertiary-level or vocational education. Young people in the study area who are able to continue to higher education have to move to Thai Nguyen City or other major urban areas. Few students from Clusters A and B, especially Hmong and Dao, have completed college or university education. The following sections describe the patterns of educational disparities in the study area by birth cohorts, ethnicity, and sex. We also compare the differentials in educational attainment in the study villages with those observed elsewhere and attempt to explain sources of such educational inequality.
Differentials in Educational Attainment in the Study Area

Intergenerational Differentials: In general, young people in the study area are more likely than their parents to have enrolled in school. A descriptive analysis of Village Census 2005 presented in Figure 4.5 shows cohort trends in school participation rates by sex and ethnicity.

Figure 4.5. Cohort trends in school participation rates by sex and ethnicity

Results suggest that today’s young generations attend school in a remarkably higher proportions than the older generations. This trend is consistent for both Kinh and minority populations and for both males and females. Intergenerational differences are more dramatic among ethnic minorities. For example, while less than 40 percent of minority women born in 1965 or earlier (i.e., age 40 and over) were in school, well over 80 percent of younger minority women who were born after 1981 (i.e., below age 25) attended school.⁹ In the in-depth interviews, villagers of the parental generation usually referred to hardships they faced while growing up as a major hindrance to their school attendance.

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⁹ A sharp drop in the proportion who have ever been to school observed among the 1976-1980 cohorts of Kinh and minority women is perhaps attributable to noise in the data. It is beyond the scope of this report to evaluate this discrepancy. Moreover, a slight decline in percentage of school participation rates among the youngest cohort (1991-1995) is likely explained by late entry to schooling among some children in the study area. According to in-depth interviews, some Hmong and Dao children did not start the 1st grade until they were 9 or 10.
Figure 4.6 Percent of villagers with at least some lower-secondary education by birth cohort, sex, and ethnicity


Figure 4.7. Percent of villagers with at least some upper-secondary education by birth cohort, sex, and ethnicity

Not only are the differences in school participation rates between parents and children remarkable, but the differential levels of education attained by various cohorts of young people are also noteworthy. Figure 4.6 shows proportions of villagers who have at least some lower-secondary education by their birth cohort, sex, and ethnicity. The percent of young people who attained this level of secondary schooling increases considerably among the 1981-1985 and 1986-1990 cohorts (i.e., youth ages 15-24). This provides a stark contrast to the rates observed among the 1976-1980 cohort (ages 25-29). Such cohort differentials are consistent among Kinh and minority young people. Comparable intergenerational differences are also observed in the transition from lower to upper-secondary education (Figure 4.7). In general, proportions of young people who had some upper-secondary schooling are low. An upward trend in attainment of upper-secondary education is clear among younger birth cohorts, particularly those born in 1981-1985.

Ethnic Differentials: There has been a substantial expansion in educational opportunities in the study area. School participation rates have increased across all younger cohorts of Kinh, Dao, and Hmong. But ethnic disparities in educational attainment remain significant. According to Figure 4.5, regardless of ethnicity, over 80 percent of young people born after 1980 attended school. While there appears to be no gap between minority males and Kinh students in school enrollment rates, the proportions attending school among minority girls clearly still lag behind other groups.

What is more worrisome is that much smaller proportions of minority students, compared to their Kinh counterparts, managed to make the transition to lower-secondary school. Figure 4.6 suggests that while there is generally an upward trend among younger cohorts in proportions having at least some lower-secondary education, the ethnic gap remains large. For example, while nearly 60 percent of Kinh born in 1986-1990 made a transition to lower-secondary schooling, only 42 and 31 percent of young minority men and women respectively acquired such level of education.

Until recently a transition to upper-secondary education was quite rare among villagers in the study area. According to a teacher from Trang Xa Commune, even though students from Trang Xa have one of the highest rates in Vo Nhai District of students continuing to upper-secondary level, only 60 percent of students from the 9th grade did so last academic year. Transition to upper-secondary education is even rarer among minority students. Figure 4.7 indicates an upward trend in proportions of Kinh students having at least some upper-secondary education. For instance, the proportions increase from 12 percent among males born in 1976-1980 to 20 percent among those born 1981-1985. The improvement is much more modest among minorities. Among the 1981-1985 cohort, less than 10 percent of minority men and 5 percent of their female counterparts attained upper-secondary education.

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10 In Figure 4.7, we do not report estimates from the cohorts born after 1985. Students in mountainous areas usually start school later than the standardized age of 6 years old. Therefore, it is likely that they had not yet completed lower-secondary school at the time the village census was carried out in 2005.
Figure 4.8 Cohort trends in school participation rates: Comparing Dao and Hmong villagers


Figure 4.9 Percent of villagers with at least some lower-secondary education: Comparing Dao and Hmong villagers

Apart from the Kinh-minority gap in educational attainment, an analysis of Village Census 2005 also shows differences in the level of education attained by Dao and Hmong villagers in the study area. According to Figure 4.8, school participation rates have increased over time for both ethnic groups. For every birth cohort under consideration, the gender gap in school enrollment is much more salient among Hmong than Dao students. There is a slight decline in enrollment rates among the youngest cohort of Hmong (sharper among females than males). This seems to suggest that Hmong boys and girls begin schooling at a later age than Dao and Kinh students. It is still common for Hmong children to start school at the age of 9 or 10. Moreover, Figure 4.9 examines the Dao-Hmong differentials in transition to lower-secondary education. Results show that attainment of lower-secondary education is more common among Hmong and Dao who were born after 1980 (below age 25). Hmong young women appear to fall behind other ethnic minority youth in the transition to lower-secondary schooling.

Gender Differentials: In the study area, gender inequality in educational attainment is more apparent among ethnic minorities than among Kinh. For ethnic minorities (Hmong in particular), the gender gap in education is persistent across all levels of schooling and exists even among the most recent cohorts of students (Figures 4.8 and 4.9). Meanwhile, for the Kinh, the gender gap narrows over time. While the gap between Kinh boys and girls appears to be closing at the lower-secondary level (Figure 4.6), there remain some gender differentials in a transition to upper-secondary schooling (Figure 4.7).

The patterns of gender differentials in educational attainment observed in the study area differ from the trends seen generally in Vietnam, where boys and girls are increasingly more likely to enjoy equal educational opportunities. Given a strong son preference and early marriage (to be discussed in Chapter 5) among ethnic minorities in the study area, it is uncertain whether the gender inequality in education will disappear any time soon. Overall, young people in Clusters A and B in Vo Nhai District have lower levels of educational attainment than young people in the lowland area of Thai Nguyen Province. For ethnic minority students, completing primary school and entering lower-secondary levels are still a challenge. This is particularly the case for Dao students in Village A5 where the satellite school offers classes from the 1\textsuperscript{st} to 3\textsuperscript{rd} grades only. For Kinh students in the study area, it is rather the transition to upper-secondary and tertiary levels that remains a challenge. In Trang Xa, for example, very few students who graduate from upper-secondary school are successful in gaining admission to universities. In 2005, there was only one such student from the entire commune. In 2006, the number increased to 7 students – a very small proportion relative to those who graduated from the 12\textsuperscript{th} grade. Those who can afford to continue their studies usually attend vocational schools or teaching colleges (known as cao dang) where they earn associate degrees. Evidence of low transition rates to higher education indicates the need for more attention to the quality of teaching and learning among students in the study area.

Explaining Differentials in Educational Attainment

Several factors explain why young people in the study area lag behind youth elsewhere in Vietnam in educational attainment and why minority young people are among the most underdeveloped. The analysis presented in this section utilizes participant observation and in-depth interviews with young people ages 15-29 and their parents. It also draws on community appraisals in which teachers in the study area were interviewed.

Physical Accessibility: Remoteness is often cited as a reason why young people drop out of school or discontinue schooling after finishing a certain level of education. Over the past few years, there have been a number of efforts in the study area to increase the accessibility of schools by improving inter-village roads and school infrastructure. However, success has been limited to the provision of primary education. Many families still struggle to gain access to secondary education. Physical accessibility of secondary schools appears to be a major hindrance. For example, there is only one lower-secondary school in Phuong Giao Commune. For the upper-secondary level, students from Cluster A do not have alternatives other than attending the schools in Dinh Ca.11 Inter-commune and inter-village roads constructed after 2000 have certainly helped increase school accessibility. Yet, the new roads tend to benefit students who are currently below age 15 rather than the older cohorts. Only a handful of young people whom we interviewed (ages 15-29) said that their educational attainment directly benefited from increased road accessibility.

The issue of school accessibility appears to be most critical for Dao students in Village A5 and Hmong students who live in remote parts of Village B4. The problem is further aggravated by factors such as lack of school infrastructure and school schedules that are not sensitive to other needs of students. For instance, because of a constant lack of classrooms in local schools, classes can only meet in the early afternoon (i.e., other levels meet in the morning) and usually do not end until late afternoon. Some Dao and Hmong students do not return home from school until 7-8 p.m. because of the long commute via mountainous roads. While physical exhaustion reduces students’ motivation to study, some parents are also concerned about the safety of their children, especially girls.

Economic Deprivation: In addition to physical accessibility, household poverty is another important factor for low educational attainment in the study area. Prior to doi moi, when disposable income was rare, tuition was paid in maize. In the 1980s, for example, a family that sent children to school was required to contribute 30 kilograms of corn per student per semester. Likewise, teachers’ salaries were also paid in kind. One former teacher, for example, recalled that he received 30 kilograms of rice per month (the amount was so low that he later quit the teaching job). In the years immediately after the start of doi moi, parents were required to contribute to children’s educational fees in cash. Since the late 1990s when both Phuong Giao and Trang Xa Communes were classified as two of the most disadvantaged and difficult

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11 The upper-secondary school in Trang Xa was not established until 2006. At the time of this study, it is too early to assess the impact of this school on young people’s attainment of upper-secondary education.
communes under Program 135 and HEPR, households that have school-age members have been entitled to receive educational assistance. Regardless of their household economic status or ethnicity, students in the study area who enroll in the 1st through 12th grades receive a tuition waiver. Compared to Kinh students, ethnic minority students receive slightly higher educational subsidies. For example, starting in 2006, they receive 60,000 VND annually as a subsidy for their textbooks. Further, they receive a reduction for certain school fees.

Although per capita income has generally risen and various forms of monetary assistance to education have been available in the study area over the past few years, economic deprivation remains one of the main reasons for low enrollment rates in secondary school and few successful transitions to higher education among young people in the study area. While tuition and some fees are waived, families are still required to pay several itemized fees for their children’s education. Interviews with young people and their parents often reveal that schooling costs are higher than they expected, despite the tuition waiver and an exemption from other fees.

Sending children to upper-secondary schools in Dinh Ca is considered unaffordable for many families in the study area. Going to college or university seems to be out-of-reach for most. The largest cost involved in financing this level of education is living expenses such as room and board. These expenses are usually not covered under the government’s financial assistance scheme for students in remote mountainous areas. Despite various school subsidies, a Dao student from Village A2, who just started her first year in the upper-secondary school in Dinh Ca, said that her family spent about 500,000 VND per year for her education. Meanwhile, a young Kinh woman from the same village said that her schooling in Dinh Ca cost her parents about one million VND per year. Both young women emphasized that they lived frugally in the district town. To come up with a substantial amount of cash, some Kinh families sell assets such as land to finance their children’s higher education. Minority families usually cannot afford to do so because of their limited assets.

While existing financial aid does encourage parents to keep their children in school longer, many families in the study area live on the brink of poverty. Taking children out of school is still a coping strategy when families experience economic shocks such as an illness of a family member.

In addition, household economic constraints may also result in the demand for child labor, which in turn negatively affects children’s educational attainment. In the interviews, some young people over age 20 attributed their low levels of educational attainment to their families’ need for their labor. In the past, older children were reportedly asked to stay at home to take care of their younger siblings so that their parents had enough time to work on the farm. It was common among earlier generations of young people to grow up with at least 5-6 siblings. Such circumstances are becoming less common among younger cohorts in the study villages, particularly among Kinh. As households in Vo Nhai District have increasingly integrated into the global market, the overall need for child labor in household production has declined. At the
same time fertility rates have declined sharply, and far greater value has been placed on higher education.

**Motivation and Enthusiasm for Learning:** Consistent with research elsewhere, we find that young people in the study area who are more enthusiastic about their studies tend to have better educational outcomes (both attainment and performance). The differentials in young people’s motivation for knowledge can be explained by various factors including their perception of the value of education, parental involvement in children’s education, quality of pedagogy, and peer influence. Education is universally valued by villagers – young and old – in the study area. However, there are differences in the way in which various groups of young people perceive the value of education. While most young people see education as a means for them to do well economically, minority young people are more likely to view the benefits of education as directly relevant to their trading of cash crops. For example, a young Hmong man said that education would help him not to fall victim to middlemen because he knew how to do math. Kinh, however, tend to discuss their desire to have higher education as a way to leave the agricultural sector, particularly labor-intensive farm work.

Although education is valued highly among young people regardless of their ethnicity and socioeconomic status, it is difficult for many of them to stay motivated. For example, in the case of students whose home is located several kilometers from school, the physical exhaustion from commuting to school each day makes it hard from them to remain enthusiastic about their studies. Further, young people in the study area are usually expected to perform various household chores and farm work in addition to their studies. Children from poor households usually have to do more housework and farm work than those from better-off families. Many young people we interviewed complain that the work they have to perform for their families sometimes make them too tired to study at night and remain motivated.

Our fieldwork suggests that parental involvement in children’s education has a strong positive impact on young people’s motivation for learning and, in turn, their success in educational attainment. Kinh parents in the study area are generally more engaged in their children’s educational attainment than minority parents. Teachers also consistently reported that some minority parents tend to miss parents-teachers meetings. Differentials in parental involvement can perhaps be explained by parents’ own level of education, social status, and perception about the value of education.

Although parents have considerable influence on young people’s enthusiasm for learning, friends and peers also play an important role in determining young people’s motivation or lack of motivation to study. During the fieldwork, we spoke with many young people, particularly from ethnic minorities, who referred to peer influence as one of the major reasons they dropped out of school. In addition, young people’s varying motivation for learning can be explained by the quality of educational provision and pedagogy, which depends on school facilities as well as human resources. The physical infrastructure of schools appears to affect
students’ learning. Most young people in the study area began their education well before schools in Vo Nhai District were renovated.

Moreover, the teaching quality in the study area is questionable. Teachers at local schools are usually recruited by Vo Nhai District’s DOET. Many of them are not originally from the study area but are usually native to other communes in Vo Nhai District. Most of the teachers are Kinh; none of them are Hmong or Dao. Teachers’ qualifications appear to have increased a great deal in recent years. A few decades ago teachers at local schools may have had only lower-secondary education and some teachers’ training. At the present time, most teachers hold at least associate degrees in teaching. It is reported that incentives for teachers in mountainous areas have increased over the past few years. The quality of teaching, however, still receives a mixed review from students and their parents. In general, the educational quality in mountainous areas is perceived to be inferior to what is available in urban areas. Some young people reported that when they were considering dropping out, their teachers encouraged them to continue studying. However, others mentioned that their teachers’ lack of motivation affected their learning negatively.

Teachers’ absenteeism is more common in satellite schools than in major schools in the study area. As mentioned earlier, some teachers are reportedly reluctant to teach at satellite schools. Upon receiving their assignment, they commute to teach during weekdays and return home on weekends. In the satellite school in Village A5, teachers reportedly re-arranged class schedules for their convenience. Instead of teaching half-day for five days a week, teachers held classes all-day from Tuesday to Thursday. As a result, contact between teachers and students in satellite schools is considerably less than in main schools where most Kinh children attend. At the present time, monitoring and quality control are difficult to carry out in schools in remote mountainous areas. Teachers are not held accountable for students’ academic performance. During the fieldwork, a few minority young people mentioned that a lack of good relationship between teachers and students reduced their incentive to remain in school.

Language Barriers: Low educational attainment among Dao and Hmong young people in the study area is partly attributable to their lack of proficiency in Kinh. Ethnic languages are still used extensively in minority households (Box 4.2). In the household survey, all sample minority households report that either Hmong or Dao is used at home and that household members speak Kinh only when they communicate with other ethnic groups. Most minority young people in the study villages reportedly learn to speak Kinh only when they start going to school. At local schools in the study area, none of the teachers are of Dao or Hmong ethnicity and Kinh is the only language of instruction. Despite having an ethnically diverse group of students, local schools are required to follow a nationally standardized curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education and Training.

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12 Teachers in mountainous areas receive slightly higher salary than teachers stationed elsewhere. Primary school teachers in Phuong Giao Commune, for example, receive between 1.2 and 1.4 million VND per month.
Box 4.2: Multi-lingual Education for Vietnam? A Long Way to Go

Vietnam’s constitution states that each ethnic group has the right to use its own languages. Yet, use of ethnic minority languages in education is limited to a small number of schools. The Ministry of Education and Training guidelines restrict the language of instruction to Kinh. Only eight minority languages are taught as school subjects, and few books are written in languages other than the main minority languages: Tay, Muong, Cham, and Khmer. There are few ethnic minority teachers owing to the difficulties they face progressing through the educational system.

In their effort to promote multi-lingual education in Vietnam, Save the Children UK works with “key mothers” in highland communities, building their skills as teaching assistants in pre-schools so that each class has a resource person who speaks the children’s language.

Key mothers work with teachers to ensure that content is relevant, adapting curricula and textbooks to the local context and using active play and learning techniques. They use local languages to introduce new content, and the teacher reinforces the message in spoken Kinh. To help prepare children for primary school, Kinh is introduced verbally and children are familiarized with the Kinh alphabet.

At present time, the project is very small-scale. According to Save the Children UK, it is not possible to deliver truly bilingual education through Vietnam’s school system in the politically constrained context, and significant impact may not be seen for many years.

Source: Adapted from Pinnock, Dinh, and Nguyen. 2006.

While most minority young people we interviewed speak Kinh quite fluently, they indicated that it took them at least a few years in school to be able to make sense of what their teachers taught. Because of their lack of language proficiency, some minority students are required to repeat classes a few times before they can progress to the next level of schooling. The language barriers appear to have long-term negative effects on their education, particularly affecting young people’s school performance and transitions to higher education. Since minority students are more likely to start school at a later age and to have to repeat classes, they usually are much older than their Kinh classmates by the time they reach secondary school. This affects children’s socialization, as well as their academic performance.

Transition from School to Work

Our fieldwork suggests that a combination of factors explains why some young people have better educational preparation than others. In this section, we describe how such differentials in educational preparation affect young people’s transition to work. In so doing, we illustrate different pathways young men and women take after leaving school to become economic providers for their families. Many young people we interviewed expressed a great deal of concern about whether they could find a job outside their home villages. As in other rural areas of Vietnam, the transition from school to work in the study area takes place gradually. Economically productive work is not foreign to most young people in Vo Nhai District. Well before they complete schooling, most children have already helped their families in farm production.
By the time many young people reach their early teens, it is likely that they have already had some experience working as day laborers. This is not only true among those with less education but also applies to youth who go to Dinh Ca to attend upper-secondary schools. Students reportedly take up part-time jobs in the district town. Most productive work available to children and teenagers in the study area is agricultural and labor-intensive. On one hand, young people officially become full-time workers and economic providers when they leave school. On the other hand, there are instances in which jobs that young people take become so time-consuming that they must quit schooling altogether.

Four major economic sectors employ young people in the study area: 1) family farm; 2) non-family farm; 3) family non-farm; and 4) non-family non-farm. The family farm sector offers the most familiar type of work that all villagers grow up with. Non-labor-intensive jobs in the non-family non-farm sector are considered the most desirable among younger cohorts of Kinh and ethnic minority villagers. Employment in non-family sectors often requires young workers to move short- or long-term away from their home villages. Since the local economy is growing rapidly and road accessibility has greatly improved, it is common for young people to switch back and forth between the family farm sector and other sectors, particularly those involving labor-intensive jobs. The following sections examine how the transition from school to work differs among Kinh and minority young people by describing pathways to each of the four economic sectors.

**Figure 4.10.** Kinh girls carrying rice transplants to fields in Phuong Giao Commune, where rice is grown for subsistence rather than for sale.

**Family Farm Sector:** The family farm sector involves more young people in the study area than any other sector. Regardless of their educational background many young people, especially never-married Kinh, express the desire to abandon family farm work. Most of them view agricultural work as back-breaking with little return.

Despite such a negative outlook toward farm work, young people agree that it offers them a social safety net. Youth who have just finished school work on the family farm while looking for other jobs. Migrant workers return to farm work if they fail at jobs outside the home villages. A large number of young people in the study area remain – voluntarily or involuntarily – in the family farm sector and have a tendency to stay throughout their life course. This group
tends to have less social and human capital, including young people who are less educated (i.e., lower-secondary education or less), belong to ethnic minority groups, and have had little contact with the outside world. A lack of proficiency in Kinh also discourages minority young people from looking for jobs elsewhere.

Family circumstances appear to play an important role in determining whether young people remain in the family farm sector. Ethnic minority parents are more likely than their Kinh counterparts to view land as a source of life-long security. By staying in the farm sector, they can avoid the risks associated with non-farm jobs. Moreover, some villagers have an idyllic view of village life and therefore tend to see more negative influences in the cities where non-farm jobs are found. Young people who are married and have children are more likely to harbor such perceptions.

The younger generation of farmers appears to have relatively better educational preparation than their parents. In fact, a substantial number of them have upper-secondary schooling. They often express interest in planting new cash crops or breeding animals. The expansion of inter-village and inter-commune roads has brought markets closer to most villagers. The assistance from Vietnam’s poverty reduction programs has the potential to accelerate economic growth in the study area and raise the living standards of villagers. At the present time, however, a lack of capital (both land and money for investment) is pervasive. Credit programs under the targeted poverty reduction schemes are available to only some households. Most young people do not have access to credit programs and have to depend on their family for capital, thus limiting their own initiatives.

While the study area as well as the rest of Vo Nhai district has increasingly been integrated into the global market (particularly after the WTO accession), most young people who remain in the family farm sector are not well-equipped with knowledge about current issues and technology that would help them keep up with globalization. Such lack of knowledge makes them vulnerable to rapid socioeconomic change. Most villagers do not habitually read newspapers, and television ownership is a relatively recent phenomenon. It remains to be seen whether the new media might have positive impact on the farm sector.

**Non-family Farm Sector:** Not only do young people in the study area work on their family farm but many also work as farm laborers for non-relatives. While most take up this type of job after the harvest season, some do it year round. Non-family farm work may be available within their own village, in nearby villages, or in neighboring communes. It often requires young people to travel a short distance for a brief period of time ranging from a few days to a few weeks. In recent years, opportunities for this type of work have increased throughout the study area. This is particularly true in predominantly Kinh villages in Cluster B, where the economy is more diversified. In Cluster B, an increasing number of families have income coming primarily from remittances, service, and trades rather than farm work.
This sector does not require high skills but is labor intensive. Wages vary between 20,000 and 30,000 VND per day (see more in Chapter 3). Ethnic minority youth and those who are less educated are more likely to be employed in this sector. Most young people take up non-family farm work to diversify their household income. Recently, an increasing number of young men and women in the study villages have been drawn to fairly lucrative wage labor in the thriving lumber industry in Vo Nhai District.

Family Non-Farm Sector: This sector of the economy has growth potential in the study area. Currently, only a handful of young people and their families are involved in non-farm family enterprises. They tend to be Kinh and have better socioeconomic status relative to the rest of the villagers. Villagers in Cluster B are more likely to engage in this economic sector than those in Cluster A because of their easy accessibility to Dinh Ca and to the Dong Bo market. Moreover, residents of Cluster B generally have higher disposable income than those in Cluster A.

Most shops found in the study area sell food and household goods. However, increasingly, new family businesses offer different products and services. A young Kinh woman, for example, has just opened a tailor shop in Village B3. Her customers are both Kinh and Hmong. At the time of the study, few minority young people in the study area expressed an interest in starting family enterprises. Young entrepreneurs usually have experience living outside their home village. Lack of capital and of support from older family members prevents many young people from pursuing their interests.

Non-Family, Non-Farm Sector: Many young people in the study area aspire to work in the non-farm sector. Both young people and their families usually perceive employment in this sector to be much less labor-intensive, while yielding much better returns than jobs in the farm sector in which they grew up. Many households in the study villages consider sending a family member, particularly a young person, to work in the non-farm sector as a strategy to diversify their sources of income. Further, since most employment in the non-family, non-farm sector is available outside the commune, some youth see this as an opportunity to broaden their perspectives.

While workers are generally required to have at least lower-secondary education (i.e., the 9th grade), specific training and skills required for manual work vary greatly depending on the type of job, employer, location, and pay scale. Young people who look for manual work usually prefer to obtain a job in the formal industrial sector (preferably foreign or joint-venture factories) where they earn monthly salaries and other fringe benefits. However, many of them end up taking non-farm jobs in the informal sector. These are usually labor intensive, pay daily wages, and offer no benefits. Since there are some educational requirements, more Kinh than minority young people take this pathway as they make the transition into work. The second pathway is generally less common among young people in the study area. There are fewer non-manual jobs and young workers have less information about these jobs than about manual ones.
In addition, they often require more educational training, usually at the tertiary level. Young people who are eligible to take the second pathway are mostly Kinh.

During the fieldwork, young people who were looking for non-farm work usually expressed their preference to stay close to their families if economic opportunities were available. However, there are very few non-farm employment opportunities – either manual or non-manual – in Phuong Giao, in Trang Xa, or even in Dinh Ca. The major employers in the study area are government offices at the commune or district levels.\footnote{At present, many young Kinh women from Cluster A are enrolling in a teachers’ college in Thai Nguyen City studying to become kindergarten teachers. They hope to get a job at local schools; however, teaching positions are rare since the turnover rates for teachers in the study area are relatively low.}

With very limited opportunities in the study area, young people who aspire to become non-farm salary workers need to travel outside Vo Nhai District. To get what they consider a good manual job, they usually have to travel beyond Thai Nguyen City or to the outskirts of Hanoi. Some travel as far as the South near Ho Chi Minh City. In general, fewer factory jobs are available in the North than in the South of Vietnam.

Over the past few years, there has been a trend in labor movement from the study area to countries such as Taiwan and Malaysia. Kinh workers are more likely than their minority counterparts to participate in this international labor migration. Jobs available to Vietnamese workers in both Taiwan and Malaysia are labor intensive and require low skills. About five years ago, young women (usually already married) from the study villages started going to work in Taiwan. Most of them are from Kinh villages in Cluster B. They usually take a job as a live-in maid or caretaker in middle-class Taiwanese families and are required to work in Taiwan for three years. Because the returned migrants appear to be quite successful, villagers generally have a positive view about labor migration to Taiwan.

The labor movement to Malaysia has started recently in both clusters. Recruiters from Hanoi came to the study area to offer young men and women factory work in Malaysia. It was unclear to villagers what types of work such recruits would be doing in Malaysia. Some said their sons would be working in furniture factories; others mentioned confectionary factories. The requirements are few, although workers must pass a health check-up and take preparatory classes before they can travel to Malaysia. Workers are responsible for tuition and fees for these classes. At the time of the study, a few Dao men in Cluster A had gone to Malaysia, while some Kinh villagers were preparing to go.

While many young people in the study area would like to work in the formal non-farm sector, very few actually achieve their goal. According to the in-depth interviews and participant observation a number of factors explain why some young people are successful in obtaining employment in this sector and others are not. Education is one of the most fundamental criteria. As mentioned earlier, most jobs require at least lower-secondary education. Average educational
attainment of young people in the study area who are in their 20s (particularly ethnic minority youth) is primary schooling. Therefore, they are less likely to meet the educational requirement.

Another important factor is household economic status. When workers seek factory employment, they are usually required to pay an “application fee” to recruiters or to a human resources department. The application fee ensures that workers will obtain a position with the company. The fees vary greatly depending on how competitive such employment is. Because the fees are usually very high—e.g., two or three times greater than the average annual income of a household in the study area—many young people cannot afford to apply.

While many young villagers show a keen interest in working overseas, they are unable to pay for fees associated with traveling and living expenses. For example, the fees associated with going to work in Malaysia under a 2-year contract are approximately 20 million VND (1,250 USD). Families who decide to take the risk may borrow money from banks or sell household assets such as buffaloes or cows.

In addition to education and economic status, strong social networks appear to be very important for workers in acquiring a good job in the non-farm sector. A majority of young people who are hired in this sector reportedly hear about the job and receive assistance from their family members, relatives, and friends who live in urban areas or have frequent contact with persons living outside Vo Nhai District. While many minority residents in the study area have relatives living outside Vo Nhai District, members of their social networks usually reside in rural and remote areas.