Barriers Faced by Akha and Khmu Ethnic Minority Students in Rural Primary Schools in Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of the study was to examine the major barriers faced by Akha and Khmu ethnic minority children in attending rural primary schools in Samphan District, Phongsaly Province, and Lao PDR.

The convergent parallel mixed method design was employed for an in-depth investigation. The primary data was collected by combining a questionnaire and a focus group interview with parents, teachers, education staff, and community leaders. Samples were selected through non-probability and purposive sampling techniques.

The present study found that family poverty, child labour, parental divorce, parental deaths, a lack of learning materials, the language of instruction, a water shortage, parental gender bias, and parental devaluation of education were identified as major barriers to Akha and Khmu ethnic minority children attending rural primary schools.

KEYWORDS: Primary School Access, Rural Schools, Ethnic Minority Student, Barrier, Rural Primary Schools

INTRODUCTION

Since education is a fundamental human right and the cornerstone of both fostering peace and advancing sustainable development, it is UNESCO's top priority. Education plays a key role in attaining all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and leaving no one behind is a key element of the global education agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2019). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, explicitly states that everyone has the right to education. According to that declaration, education must be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (United Nations, 1949). These are reflected and reaffirmed in the sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly goal 4, which states that by 2030, both girls and boys will have had a free, equal, and high-quality primary and secondary education that produces useful and efficient learning results, eliminate gender gaps in education by 2030, and guarantee that all disadvantaged groups, including individuals with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in precarious situations, will have equitable access to all levels of education and vocational training (UNESCO, 2019).

Therefore, the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has re-set education as the country's top priority in the 9th National Socio-economic Development Plan (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2021). According to Article 6, "All Lao citizens have the right to education, regardless of their gender, sex, social economic status, education, beliefs, and ethnic origin" (Education Law, 2015). To re-affirm these goals, the government of Lao PDR has set out a considerable number of primary education provision strategies and frameworks to accelerate the development and achievements of goal 4 of the sustainable development goals, including the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021–2025 (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2020), the Vision 2030 and Strategy 2025, and the Education Sector Development Plan (2016–2020) (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2015).

Consequently, Lao PDR has made substantial progress toward goal 4 of sustainable development. However, despite 99% of children attending school, which means nearly all children have access to primary education, completion rates are still below average, and grade 1 dropout and repeat rates are high, which contributes to the comparatively low cohort completion rates (Government of the Lao PDR, 2021). This evidence is further supported by a case study by UNESCO (2021), which reported that primary net enrolment was 98.8% for girls and 99.3% for boys in the academic year 2019–2019. However, the primary school-to-last-grade survival rate remained at 82.17 percent. Those who were from ethnic minorities were living in rural and remote areas, far behind the ethnic majority.

There are a wide range of arguments that tend to have an impact on school enrolment. Numerous studies have indicated that economic constraints have a positive correlation with school enrolment (Batool & Liu, 2021; Broberg, Wang,

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Östberg, Adolfsson, Nemes, Sparén, et al., 2018; Bhatti & Awan, 2019; Drajeaa & O'Sullivan, 2020). Several research studies, including Bhatti and Awan (2019), Oni (2018), Ali (2020), Nelson and Quiton (2018), and Kitambazi and Lyamuya (2022), found that child labour was a major factor contributing to school non-attendance. In addition, there was a correlation between school attendance and family size. Shen, Blaabk, Jger, and Molitoris (2017, 2020), and Scholar (2020), who argued that children from large households were less likely to attend school. A number of studies by Gu, Hua, McKenzie, and Zheng (2022); Tighe, Lauren and Davis-Kean, Pamela (2021); Drajeaa and O'Sullivan (2020) found that children did not enrol in school because their parents undervalued the importance of education. However, a lack of drinking water was a major factor leading to school dropout and non-attendance (Staneva, Usmanb and Carmignania, 2021; Komarulzaman, De Jong and Smits, 2019; Choudhuri and Desai, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). In contrast, Trudell (2016); Bernhofer and Tonin (2022), and UNESCO (2016) found that the language of instruction was cited as a main barrier to schooling, particularly for those who are from ethnic minority groups. However, numerous researchers have made the distinct finding that children whose parents migrate are more likely to remain out of school (Wassink & Viera, 2021; Dunusinghe, 2021; Marchetta & Sim, 2021). Furthermore, research by Thurston and Salmon (2022); Kim and Jun (2022); and Asante (2022) established that due to rising costs of schooling, children did not enrol in school. The intent of this research was to investigate the main barriers faced by Akha and ethnic minority children in accessing rural primary schooling in Samphan District, Phongsaly Province.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To investigate the major barriers that had an influence on educational access, a convergent-parallel mixed method design was adopted. Creswell (2012) defined the convergent parallel design as one in which researchers collect both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently during field research, combine the data, and use the findings for an in-depth understanding of a research problem. The research was conducted in six primary schools in rural areas of Samphan District, which is one of the most educationally disadvantaged areas in the Lao PDR and has been targeted by the Ministry of Education and Sports. The key participants included 112 parents, 114 students, 29 teachers, 6 community leaders, and 2 education staff. In the present study, two sampling techniques were deployed. The first approach was non-probability sampling. With this technique, researchers can select respondents who are already available, for whom participation is convenient, and who represent some of the features that the researchers are seeking to investigate. The second approach used in the study was purposive sampling, which was adopted to select the key informants. Yin (2011) explained that the primary "goal or purpose of selecting the particular study units is to have those that will yield the most relevant and sufficient data, given your topic of study" (p. 88). The data were collected through a questionnaire that consisted of dichotomous and multiple-choice questions categorized into 5 Likert scales such as (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire was checked and validated by experts in the field, and it was piloted before the primary data collection was conducted in the field. In addition, a focus group interview was also conducted with the primary respondents. The researchers contacted the District Education Bureau, school directors, and heads of villages through gatekeepers. Moreover, confidentiality was taken into consideration, and the consent form was signed by the concerned authorities participating in the study. In addition, instructions on the purpose of the research and explanations of responding to the questionnaire were made. After that, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants at each research site. A focus group interview was also conducted in the respective selected villages. The collected data was analyzed using the SPSS program, and the results were displayed as frequency distributions. In terms of qualitative data, enter the data into computer files, case by case: teacher interviews, student interviews, parent interviews, to prepare for transcription. Data were coded and collapsed into common themes based on a visual model of the coding process (Creswell, 2012) and the key-word-in-context (KWIC) technique (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1. Perceptions of primary school teachers in the sample about the barriers faced by minority students

Item	Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	The school has an overall good environment for teaching and learning.	0	10.3	65.5	17.2
2	The poor condition of schools is a serious problem for teaching and learning.	6.9	65.5	13.8	13.8
3	Classrooms are very crowded, making it difficult to teach effectively.	3.4	51.7	24.1	17.2
4	The school lacks teaching and learning materials.	13.8	41.4	31.0	10.3
5	There are insufficient teachers at my school.	20.7	31.0	6.9	37.9

6	Most minority students come from poor background households.	3.4	41.4	31.0	24.1
7	Most minority students failed to attend pre-school.	17.2	27.6	24.1	27.6
8	Early childhood education is very important for minority students to complete primary school.	17.2	10.3	31.0	34.5
9	Most minority students struggle with language problem	17.2	44.8	10.3	20.7
10	Minority students are more in need of economic assistance.	0	24.1	37.9	31.0
11	Minority students cannot perform well because of their level of innate ability.	10.3	51.7	24.1	6.9
12	I am paying more attention to majority pupils in my teaching	34.5	31.0	24.1	3.4
13	I am paying more attention to minority pupils in my teaching.	10.3	17.2	17.2	48.3
14	Minority students are more in need of Lao language ability	20.7	24.1	24.1	27.6
15	Minority students lack support from their parents	20.7	34.5	24.1	17.2
16	Minority students are more in need of their parents' encouragement	34.5	6.9	20.7	31.0
17	Minority students are not interested in learning	20.7	55.2	10.3	10.3
18	Lack of school meals make students hungry, which hampers especially minority students at school.	31.0	31.0	31.0	3.4
19	It is very far to go to school for minority students	24.1	37.9	6.9	24.1
20	Being over-aged prevents minority students from completing primary school	20.7	34.5	34.5	6.9
21	Household chores are a hard burden for minority students, preventing them from concentrating on learning at school.	6.9	17.2	48.3	20.7
22	Lack of learning materials [uniforms, pens, textbooks] also affects school attendance and learning achievements	6.9	10.3	58.6	17.2
23	Direct and indirect costs of schooling are obstacles, especially for minority students' continuing their schooling.	6.9	65.5	24.1	0

Notes. N= 29; SD=strongly disagree, D=disagree, A=agree, and SA=strongly agree; Not all rows add to 100% because of rounding.

Table 4.1 shows the teachers' perceptions concerning the barriers facing ethnic minority students in rural primary schools. From this table it can be seen that 75.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that lack of school materials such as textbooks, school uniforms; pens, and pencils seemed to have an influential impact on ethnic minority students' school attendance (item 25), while 69.0% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that household chores were a hard burden for minority children, disrupting them from concentrating on learning at school (item 24). Further, 68.9% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that minority students were in need of economic assistance (item 10), and 55.1% strongly agreed or agreed that minority students came from poor households (item 6).

Table 4.2. Parents' perceptions of the barriers facing their children's attendance at school

Item	Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	Education is fundamental for our children's future	0	0	45.5	54.5
2	I believe that education will bring more benefits to the household	5.4	17.9	48.2	28.6
3	I do not have high expectations for my children's schooling	13.4	39.3	32.1	15.2
4	I always encourage my children to enjoy their learning at school	2.7	26.8	45.5	25.0
5	I hope and expect my children to complete primary school	0	13.4	29.5	55.4
6	Financial constraints are a major challenge to sending my children to school	3.6	12.5	32.1	51.8
7	Economic pressures also block my children's educational achievement at	25.9	37.5	29.5	7.1

	school				
8	Making a living and surviving is a real struggle for my family	7.1	3.6	33.9	55.4
9	Children are a substantial source of labor to help with family farming	7.1	21.4	32.1	39.3
10	Children are a substantial source of labor to help with household chores	2.7	4.5	47.3	45.5
11	Children should help with household domestic chores such as fetching water, collecting wood, cooking, and taking care of siblings	0.9	9.8	28.6	60.7
12	It is very far for my children to go to school	43.8	33.0	15.2	8.0
13	Sending my young children to a distant school is dangerous and a concern for us	41.1	34.8	17.9	6.3
14	Shortage of food is a serious problem for sending my children to school	17.9	30.4	27.7	24.1
15	Shortage of food deters my children's learning at school	25.9	45.5	23.2	4.5
16	My children are not interested in learning	37.5	42.0	8.9	8.9
17	My children like hunting rather than getting an education	34.8	60.7	3.6	0
18	My children prefer farming rather than going to school	33.0	54.5	10.7	0.9
19	The Lao language is a major barrier for my children going to school	0.9	1.8	49.1	48.2
20	I cannot help with my children's homework because I cannot read and write	0.9	18.8	32.1	48.2
21	It is too late for my children to complete primary school due to them being overage	47.3	47.3	3.6	0.9
22	I strongly believe that sending the boys to school is more important than sending girls	25.0	21.4	33.9	19.6
23	I support girls and boys going to school equally	6.3	17.9	31.3	44.6
24	According to tradition, girls should take responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings	5.4	19.6	23.2	49.1
25	It is not necessary for girls to go to school since they will get married and move to live in the husband's house when they become women	20.5	54.5	17.9	7.1
26	Grade repetition is making primary school completion problematic for my children	45.5	30.4	16.1	8.0

Note. N (Number of respondents) = 112. SD=strongly disagree, D=disagree, A=agree, SA= strongly agree. Not all rows add to 100% because of rounding.

Table 4.2 presents the percentage of parents' perceptions of the barriers impacting their children's attendance at school. As shown in the table, 60.7% of the parents strongly agreed that children must help with household chores, such as fetching water, collecting wood, and taking care of siblings, even if the children were enrolled in school (item 11). In addition, 55.4% of respondents strongly agreed that making a living and surviving was a real struggle and challenge for the household (item 8), and 51.8% of them strongly agreed that financial constraints were a principal barrier to sending children to school (item 6). Thus, family struggle and financial constraints seemed to influence ethnic children's attendance at school. Furthermore, 49.1% strongly agreed that culturally, girls must take care of household chores (item 24), while 48.2% strongly agreed that the Lao language was another problem for their children to learn at school (item 18), and 48.2% strongly agreed that they could not help their children with homework because they themselves could not read or write. Moreover, 45.5% of respondents strongly agreed that children were a substantial source of labor to help with household chores and family farming.

Table 4.3. Ethnic minority students' perceptions of barriers affecting their schooling

Item	Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	Lack of money makes it difficult for me to go to school	10.5	4.4	30.7	54.4
2	My parents always support and encourage me to stay in school	6.1	12.3	48.2	33.3

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3	My parents do not fully support and encourage me to continue my studies	9.6	31.6	43.9	14.0
4	I am usually very interested in learning at school	1.8	7.9	59.6	30.7
5	Completing a primary education is not important for me	43.9	46.5	6.1	3.5
6	I prefer farming (slash-and-burn cultivation) rather than getting an education	59.6	37.7	1.8	0.9
7	I prefer hunting rather than going to school	62.3	34.2	3.5	0
8	During the harvest seasons, I have to drop school, and help parents collect the yields in the rice fields	11.4	10.5	26.3	51.8
9	Helping with household chores is a hard burden distracting me from concentrating on my learning	13.2	24.6	45.6	16.7
10	Taking care of my siblings disrupts my learning at school	33.3	45.6	14.0	7.0
11	Repeating a grade discourages me from concentrating on my learning in school	48.2	37.7	8.8	4.4
12	Hunger is a real hindrance to continue my schooling	28.1	36.0	24.6	10.5
13	My parents are unable to provide me lunch during the school days	36	53.5	8.8	0.9
14	Becoming an over-aged student in the classroom makes me feel ashamed at school	57.0	26.3	13.2	3.5
15	My current primary school is located very far from my village	43.9	50.9	1.8	3.5
16	It takes a long time to walk to school	49.1	46.5	3.5	0.9
17	Walking to a distant school makes going to school difficult	41.2	34.2	19.3	5.3
18	The Lao language makes it difficult to learn the subjects at school	7.9	5.3	36.0	50.9
19	It is hard to understand the teacher's explanation and teaching due to poor Lao language	5.3	7.9	64.9	21.1
20	The teacher's punishment makes me want to stop going to school	49.1	47.4	2.6	0.9
21	Teachers punish me because of failing the exams	45.6	47.4	6.1	0.9
22	Teachers punish by difficult things like going to the front and then lifting a stone or standing on one leg	48.2	43.9	7.9	0
23	My parents are more likely to encourage boys to go to school than girls because they expect the boys will bring more advantages to the family	6.1	13.2	30.7	50.0
24	According to tradition, girls should take care of house chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings	0.9	3.5	25.4	69.3
25	According to tradition, boys should take care of collecting wild vegetables and hunting animals	13.2	14.9	41.2	30.7

Note. N (Number of respondents) = 114, SD=strongly disagree, D=disagree, A=agree, SA= strongly agree. Not all rows add to 100% because of rounding.

Table 4.3 shows the ethnic children's perceptions of the barriers they face in learning at school. Noticeably, from an ethnic and cultural perspective, household chores were seen as a major barrier to accessing education for minorities. As indicated in the table, 94.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that traditionally, girls should take care of household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings (item 24). In addition, language was cited as a major obstacle for ethnic children to go to school, as 86.9% of them strongly agreed or agreed that the Lao language made it difficult to learn the subjects at school (item 18) and 86.0% strongly agreed or agreed that it was hard to understand the teacher's explanation and teaching due to the poor Lao language. Furthermore, 85.1% strongly agreed or agreed that lack of money made it difficult to attend school (item 1), with 78.1% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that during the harvest seasons, they had to drop school to help their parents in the rice fields (item 8). An additional 80.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their parents tended to encourage boys to go to school more than girls, as they expected the boys would bring more advantages (item 23). Finally,

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71.9% strongly agreed or agreed that according to tradition, boys should take care of collecting wild vegetables and hunting animals (item 25), which could also be a barrier to their attending school.

The Ethnic Minority Children's Experiences

There were many barriers affecting ethnic minority access to primary education in the rural and remote areas of Samphan District. Access to school was impacted by family poverty; it was an obstacle that had an influential effect on minority students' continuation in primary school. The costs of schooling were a great challenge for minority students. The actual expense of school, such as the need to buy school uniforms, textbooks, pens, and pencils, was a difficult burden for students with poorer parents.

"Lack of money forced our parents to borrow money from our relatives or neighbors to pay for our school costs; so they collected forest products to sell and repay afterward." As a result, the cost of continuing our education became a serious issue for us" (Khmu students in fifth grade).

Lack of school materials was also a serious barrier that made minority students' learning difficult in rural schools. The majority of ethnic children lacked basic materials to support their learning in the classroom. For example, they came to school without textbooks and wore shabby clothes instead of school uniforms. More importantly, lack of textbooks was a major obstacle to ethnic children's learning beyond the classroom. They could not study at home or do homework after school due to the shortage of textbooks.

"Lack of textbooks is an obstacle that makes it difficult for us to learn, not only in school but also at home." Currently, we have nine subjects at the primary level, but only one textbook for each of those nine subjects. As a result, learning is extremely difficult and challenging for us" (Akha students in fifth grade).

The language of instruction was a great challenge for ethnic minority students' learning in rural primary schools; it created a major barrier, leading to misunderstanding the concepts of knowledge taught or explained by teachers in the classroom. In addition, language was a hurdle for ethnic minority students trying to make progress in rural primary education; their poor language proficiency made the ethnic students afraid to talk to teachers in the classroom due to the communication barrier. Additionally, the teachers themselves were struggling with talking to the ethnic minority students because some could not speak the ethnic dialects.

"The Lao language is demanding for us, not only in understanding the texts but also in communicating with teachers." Furthermore, the language is a real barrier to learning in primary school, which makes our learning difficult. "We rarely talk with teachers in the classroom due to our poor language skills" (grade 5 Akha students).

Parental preference based on gender is a major barrier preventing girls from continuing their education in rural settings. Parents prefer and support boys, rather than girls, to continue their education. In addition, girls have a higher possibility of dropping out of school to help out with household chores, such as carrying water, taking care of siblings, and helping their families with slash-and-burn cultivation.

"There are eight children in my family, and all the boys go to school." I am the only girl in my family, but I had to drop out of primary school. "The main reason behind my dropping out of school is that because all my siblings attend school, my parents took me out of school to help them with chores and agricultural work" (Dropout Akha Girl).

Household chores had a significant impact on ethnic minority students trying to continue to learn in rural primary schools. Chores such as carrying water, steaming rice, taking care of siblings, and going into the rice fields posed challenges for ethnic students' progress in school. Not only did chores affect the minorities' school attendance, but the chores also disrupted their learning while in school and made continuation in school more difficult. Moreover, parents taking their children to the rice fields during the school day were a serious problem, causing disruption to the minority students' school attendance.

"We help with many household chores, such as carrying water, steaming rice, taking care of siblings, and going to the rice fields. During the harvesting season, we have to stop school and go to the rice fields with our parents to collect yields and take care of siblings, even during the school day. We have a lot of household chores to do, such as carrying water, washing the dishes, and taking care of siblings. "Spending more time on household chores gives us less time to concentrate on learning in school" (Grade 5 Akha Students).

Parental divorce had an impact on some ethnic minority students' school attendance in rural areas. Because of parental divorce, children were forced to depend on their aging grandparents to continue attending school; however, their grandparents could not support them and pay their educational costs. Thus, parental divorce was another factor that pushed ethnic minority students out of the education system.

"My parents divorced, leaving me and my brother with our elderly grandparents; parental divorce forced us to rely on my elderly grandparents." My brother proceeded to secondary school, but he dropped out of school last year as our grandparents were

unable to support and pay for schooling costs. Likewise, now, I am in grade 4 of primary school, because of financial strain, my grandparents said they could not afford my schooling costs. Thus, at the end of this year, I have to drop out of primary school. (Grade-five Khmu Girl).

Parents' deaths were another obstacle hindering some ethnic minority children's primary school attendance in rural areas. To continue to study, these children were forced to depend on grandparents; however, even if they attended primary school, they struggled throughout their lives because their aged grandparents could not support them and pay their educational costs. Therefore, parental death made it difficult for some minority students to continue attending school.

"My parents are dead. Currently, I am staying with my elderly grandparents, and my grandparents said they cannot support and pay for my educational expenses. Therefore, I cannot continue my schooling after grade five. (Grade-five Akha Girl)

Too many siblings in the household were a major barrier for ethnic minority students trying to continue their schooling in rural areas, especially if many siblings were going to school concurrently. Parents were dealing with school expenses such as uniforms, textbooks, pens, and pencils. Paying the costs of schooling for many children attending school was a difficult burden for poorer parents to bear. In families with several children who attended school, the marginalized child dropped out of school to help with family farming in order to keep the young ones in school.

"There are many siblings in our families, and thus, it makes it difficult for our parents to pay for and cope with the high schooling costs for all my siblings going to school" (grade-five students).

Parental illiteracy was also a barrier impacting ethnic minority students' learning not only in school but also at home. Ethnic minority students had difficulty doing homework because their parents were not able to help them out with it.

"Our parents are uneducated." They cannot speak or write the Lao language. Even worse, when we bring school work home, our parents cannot help out. "They cannot support us and never teach us at home" (Grade 5 Akha students).

The shortage of water had an influential effect on ethnic minority students' school attendance in remote primary schools. There was no water supply for one village, and thus the children walked far downstream to carry water. Collecting water was a major barrier that affected not only school attendance but also school absence. When the stream did not provide much water in the dry season, there were numerous villagers waiting in line to collect water. Waiting for a long time to get water became problematic and had a negative effect on the ethnic minority students' access to school in the rural areas.

"In our village, water is a serious problem during the dry season. There is no water supply to the village. Thus, we have to carry water from far downstream. We have to wait in the queue to get water one by one. Some days we miss our class because we are waiting for water. "Lack of water in our village disrupts our learning at school" (grade-five Akha students).

School attendance was also significantly impacted by the poor condition of the school path. The path was very steep and slippery, which made it dangerous for young children walking to school. Some ethnic minority students were absent from class due to the slippery school path. During my fieldwork, ethnic children were observed struggling and trying hard to walk up the wet and slippery path; all of them took their shoes off and tried to walk slowly until they reached the school. When arriving at the classroom during my fieldwork, it was observed that many were absent from class because of the heavy rain.

"In the rainy days, we cannot come to school to study as usual because of the dangerous and slippery road access to the primary school" (Grade 5 Akha Students).

5. Parents' Perspectives

According to parents, household poverty posed a problem for minority students' access to primary school in rural areas. Poorer families struggled to send their children to school due to financial constraints. Often there were many children in the household going to school concurrently; this was an added burden for families to cope with, given the costs of schooling such as the purchase of textbooks, school uniforms, pens, etc. Furthermore, for poor families, having several children was impactful on determining school attendance, as one of their children would often drop out of school to support the remaining siblings in school. According to house-to-house observation and discussion during my fieldwork, the elder child was often targeted and forced to drop out of school because of family poverty and many siblings.

Teachers' Perspectives

The teachers indicated that poor households in rural areas did not send their children to school because of severe poverty. The poverty not only caused ethnic children to drop out of school, but also made it difficult for them to continue attending school. In addition, lack of learning resources, such as textbooks, uniforms, pens, and pencils, was a major challenge impacting ethnic students' school attendance. Because of a shortage of resources, ethnic children struggled to learn in school.

Labor demand in households was also a major obstacle preventing ethnic students' attendance in rural schools. Due to labor needs, families took their children to the rice fields to help collect the rice yields and take care of siblings, even if it was a

school day. Especially during the harvesting season, taking ethnic children to help with agricultural activities was one of the main causes of school absence.

"When approaching the harvesting season, the parents of minority students come to school to request permission from teachers to take their children to the rice fields to do a variety of chores, such as reaping rice, threshing rice, taking care of siblings, carrying water, and cooking, even if it is a school day" (Somboun Primary Teacher).

Water shortages were also a major barrier to minority students' attendance in rural schools. Due to the lack of a water supply in their village, ethnic children walked to a far stream to collect water. In the dry season, there was not much water; so collecting water could overlap with the minority students' school attendance; either they did not come at all or else came late to school because of their duties collecting water.

"The dry season is the worst period for the ethnic children in our village." Some days they do not come to school because of collecting water (Elaek Primary School Teacher).

Education Staff's Perspectives

From the administrators' perspective, there are many severe challenges facing ethnic minority students' access to primary education in rural areas. Firstly, family poverty was a barrier faced by ethnic minority students, and it was the primary reason that parents did not send their children to school. Secondly, lack of rice in the household had an influential impact on minority students' enrollment in school. A shortage of rice in their household led students to skip meals, and this disrupted their attention in the classroom. Thirdly, having several siblings in the household was also believed to impact ethnic minority students' access to school. Administrators said that parents could not support all of them going to school, and therefore, one of the children had to stop attending school to help support the rest of the children to continue learning, and this is confirmed by household observations: there appeared to be one primary school dropout in each house, mainly the eldest one, especially in Akha families.

Moreover, traditional beliefs about education among ethnic groups had a negative impact on ethnic minority students' access to primary education in rural areas. According to these beliefs, the parents did not send their children, and particularly girls, to school, as they believed that girls must take care of household chores such as carrying water, going to the rice fields, and taking care of siblings. Boys were more likely to attend school and receive an education. Therefore, this belief puts girls behind in schooling in rural and remote areas.

Furthermore, ethnic minority parents did not see education as important for their children, which was a major obstacle for the children attending school in remote areas. Additionally, administrators said families had a low appreciation of the benefits of education for their children, which was seen as the main reason why parents took their children to the rice fields and did not support them going to school.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows that family poverty is a major barrier preventing ethnic children from accessing primary school. This finding is consistent with those of Batool and Liu (2021); Broberg, Wang, Stberg, Adolfsson, Nemes, Sparén, et al. (2018); Bhatti and Awan (2019); and Drajeaa and O'Sullivan (2020). Another major barrier faced by ethnic minority students' access to schooling was house chores such as fetching water, collecting wood, and taking care of siblings. This result is underpinned by UNICEF and UNESCO (2015); Mpyangu et al. (2014); and the finding that there is a link between child labour and children's school absenteeism and school dropout. In addition, the current study found that parental divorce was also a barrier to ethnic minority pupils' attendance at school, especially for those whose parents separated and were forced to rely on their elderly grandparents. However, this result has not previously been described. According to the study, a significant obstacle that made learning challenging for minority children in rural schools was a shortage of instructional materials. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area that link schooling with a shortage of learning materials (Sadiman, 2006; Hossain, 2010; Ananga, 2011). Another significant obstacle for minority kids attending remote schools was a lack of water. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that water shortages were found to be a major barrier to ethnic minority students' education (Staneva, Usmanb, and Carmignania, 2021; Komarulzaman, De Jong, & Smits, 2019; Choudhuri & Desai, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, parental preference based on gender is a significant barrier preventing females from continuing their education in rural areas. Parents favor and encourage guys' academic pursuits more than those of girls. This result is in line with those of previous studies (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014; World Bank, 2005; Lewis & Lockheed, 2007). Additionally, one unanticipated finding was that parents' deaths were another obstacle hindering some ethnic minority children's primary school attendance. In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of parental deaths was detected. The lack of importance placed on education by ethnic minority parents was a significant barrier for children attending school in

remote locations. It was found that families had a low appreciation for education, leading to parents taking their children to the fields. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work by Siddiqui (2013), Nyamubi (2015), and Mpyangu et al. (2014). The language of instruction was also found to prevent Akha and Khmu ethnic minority children in rural primary schools, which creates a significant obstacle that causes students to misunderstand the concepts of knowledge that teachers are trying to teach or explain in class. This study supports evidence from previous studies (UNESCO, 2016; UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014).

CONCLUSION

There are numerous barriers found in the current study that seem to be major barriers faced by Akha and Khmu ethnic minority students in Samphan District. A significant barrier stopping ethnic children from attending elementary school is familial poverty. Child labour is another major barrier. In each village, children were found to be a major source of labor to do chores such as fetching water, collecting wood, taking care of siblings, and going to the rice field, which resulted in their non-school attendance. Another major issue found in the study was parental divorce, which was found to be a major problem for Akha and Khmu ethnic minority students accessing school. Children were forced to depend on their aging grandparents to continue attending school; however, their grandparents could not support them and pay their educational costs. In addition, a lack of water in the village was another significant barrier to minority students attending rural schools. Children traveled to a distant stream to fetch water, leading to school absenteeism and non-attendance. Furthermore, Akha and Khmu ethnic minority students had problems learning at school due to a shortage of learning materials. Parental preference based on gender is another major barrier preventing girls from continuing their education in rural settings. In a study, it was found that parents prefer and support boys, rather than girls, to continue their education. Furthermore, the deaths of parents hampered the attendance of some ethnic minority children in primary school. These children were forced to depend on grandparents; however, even if they attended primary school, they struggled throughout their lives because their aged grandparents could not support them and pay their educational costs. In addition, education being undervalued by parents is also a main barrier, leading to school non-attendance. The language of instruction was also found to pose problems for minority students in acquiring lessons delivered by teachers. research and write a final report in the future.

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