IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)
Volume 31, Issue 11, Series 3 (November, 2026) 53-63
e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
www.iosrjournals.org

Educational Barriers And Discontinuities In Livelihood Orientation Among Gia Rai Students After Primary School

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Abstract
This article examines educational barriers and discontinuities in livelihood orientation among ethnic Gia Rai students in Gia Lai Province during the transition from primary to lower-secondary education. Using a mixed-methods design that combines questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, the study finds that, despite relatively strong motivation to learn, students' educational trajectories are frequently disrupted by the combined effects of household livelihood pressures, language barriers, and the absence of professional school-based support mechanisms. The findings reveal a marked shift from idealized occupational aspirations toward spontaneous, low-value forms of unskilled work. On this basis, the authors propose a multidimensional set of interventions emphasizing stronger school social work, culturally responsive early career education, and more targeted economic support policies. The study provides empirical evidence to support sustained school participation and improved human-resource quality in ethnic minority communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

Keywords*: Barriers, education, discontinuity, livelihood, students, primary education, Gia Rai, Gia Lai*

Date of Submission: 09-11-2026 Date of Acceptance: 21-11-2026

I. Introduction

Within Vietnam's national education development strategy, increasing enrolment and reducing school dropout among ethnic minority children are central objectives for promoting social equity. Nevertheless, education in the Central Highlands generally, and in Gia Lai Province specifically, continues to face significant limitations. The proportion of ethnic minority students completing general education remains below the national average (Doan Nguyet Linh, Nguyen Quy Thanh, 2025). Sociological reports indicate that indigenous groups such as the Gia Rai and Bahnar face a dual barrier: economic poverty and a cultural discontinuity between home and school. Amid economic transition and integration, a substantial proportion of ethnic minority adolescents tend to leave school early for informal employment in order to meet their households' immediate needs (Hoang Thi Hai Yen, 2024).

Educational discontinuity after primary school, typically at ages 10–11, is not only a violation of children's rights but also generates long-term socioeconomic consequences. Human capital theory regards education as a strategic investment that increases labour productivity (Becker, 1993). Leaving school immediately after primary education deprives students of opportunities to acquire advanced knowledge and occupational skills, limiting them largely to low-productivity manual labour markets (Dam Duc Duong, 2021). In livelihood terms, ethnic minority populations in the Central Highlands often lack clear career orientation and consequently depend on traditional agriculture or seasonal wage labour (Dam Duc Duong, 2021). This produces an intergenerational poverty cycle: poverty causes school dropout, while early dropout reproduces poverty in the next generation.

Although greater attention has recently been paid to student-streaming and career-guidance policies, reaching students in remote areas remains difficult because of language barriers and limited family engagement (Dam Duc Duong, 2021). It is therefore urgent to investigate how educational barriers disrupt livelihood orientation among Gia Rai students in Gia Lai and to identify opportunities for early intervention through school social work.

Recognizing the importance of this issue, the research team conducted the study entitled ***"Educational Barriers and Discontinuities in Livelihood Orientation among Gia Rai Students after Primary School."*** The study systematically analyses economic, cultural, and institutional barriers to continued schooling and clarifies how these barriers reshape students' occupational intentions, from aspirations to the acceptance of low-value informal work. Participants include ethnic minority primary school students and local adolescents in remote districts of Gia Lai Province who left school after completing primary education. The study subsequently proposes measures to address limitations and barriers in education and livelihood orientation for students in Gia Lai.

II. Theoretical background and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical background

Human capital theory

Human capital theory conceptualizes education as a process through which individuals accumulate resources capable of generating economic value. Becker (1993) regards an individual's skills, knowledge, and health as forms of capital because they can produce income and other economic returns in the future. Participation in education and training is therefore not merely consumption but a purposeful investment. Such decisions are based on comparing the present value of costs, including tuition and the opportunity cost of foregone income, with the anticipated benefit of higher future earnings (Becker, 1993). At the market level, higher educational attainment raises the marginal productivity of labour and thereby leads to higher wages (Schultz, 1961). Human-capital development, however, does not occur in isolation; it depends strongly on social capital, including the family and community environments that provide networks and psychological resources essential to learning (Coleman, 1988).

Rational choice theory

Rational choice theory rests on the proposition that human behaviour results from calculations intended to achieve optimal goals under resource constraints (Scott, 2000). Individuals are treated as rational actors who seek to maximize utility, making decisions after weighing expected benefits against costs (Becker, 1976). Social behaviours – from marriage and childbearing to educational and livelihood decisions – are explained through individual choices grounded in ordered preferences and consistency of reasoning (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997). In education, this perspective helps explain why students and families may choose to leave school when they perceive current costs to exceed the expected benefits of formal education (Becker, 1976; Scott, 2000).

School social work

School social work is a professional field that plays a pivotal role in helping students overcome social, emotional, and economic barriers to academic success (Allen-Meares, 2013). Unlike conventional educational approaches, school social workers serve as coordinating links among families, schools, and communities, creating a comprehensive support ecosystem (Franklin et al., 2013). This model prioritizes systemic intervention by supporting individual students, improving classroom environments, and strengthening parental capacity (Allen-Meares, 2013).

Cultural capital

In Pierre Bourdieu's theory, academic success is shaped not only by individual intellectual ability but also by "cultural capital" – the non-economic resources accumulated through the family (Baicai & Jingjian, 2010). Cultural capital exists in three principal states: embodied (knowledge, language, and dispositions), objectified (books and learning materials), and institutionalized (degrees and certificates). In ethnic minority educational settings, a shortage of cultural goods at home and a mismatch in language and cognitive habits place students at a cultural-capital disadvantage from the outset relative to the norms required by formal schooling (Baicai & Jingjian, 2010).

Baicai and Jingjian (2010) emphasize that parental expectations and guidance concerning the value of education constitute an important form of cultural capital. In minority communities, when parents lack the academic cultural capital needed to support their children or leave educational decisions entirely to them, students may readily lose direction. Combined with economic pressure, this deficit in "orientational cultural capital" encourages students to abandon long-term occupational goals in favour of familiar, short-term, low-productivity livelihoods embedded in family culture (Baicai & Jingjian, 2010).

Taken together, these theories show that post-primary educational discontinuity does not stem from a single cause but from three closely interconnected sets of factors: (1) economic factors, explained through human capital and rational choice theories, whereby households prioritize immediate labour when the opportunity cost of schooling exceeds expected benefits; (2) cultural factors, interpreted through Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, whereby limited academic cultural capital within the family weakens students' long-term educational orientation; and (3) institutional factors, explained by the role of school social work, whereby the absence of school-based support allows economic and cultural barriers to reinforce one another and accelerate educational discontinuity. These economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions constitute the analytical framework used throughout the literature review, survey analysis, and proposed solutions.

2.2. Literature review

A number of empirical studies in Vietnam and elsewhere have examined barriers to children's educational access that lead to early school leaving and entry into the labour market. In Vietnam, Hoang Thi Hai Yen (2025) investigated labour participation among ethnic minority students at selected lower-secondary schools in Muong Te District, Lai Chau Province. The study analysed why students had to work, how they perceived this work, and its effects on their health, psychological well-being, learning, and behaviour. It proposed measures through which schools could strengthen the prevention of child labour, particularly from a school social work perspective. This work builds on an earlier study of school social work activities supporting child-labour-prevention skills education in several lower-secondary schools in Lai Chau Province (Hoang Thi Hai Yen, 2024), which proposed measures to improve the effectiveness of such activities.

Internationally, Lu et al. (2016) provided empirical evidence on dropout in poor rural areas of north-western China. Based on a survey of 14,761 students, they found that, although national statistics reported a dropout rate of only 0.2%, the actual annual rate in these areas was 2.5%, producing a cumulative rate of 8.2% across the primary cycle. The study highlighted ethnic and gender inequalities: ethnic minority students, particularly Hui and Salar students, were significantly more likely to leave school than Han students, while nearly 23% of ethnic minority girls dropped out before completing Grade 6. These discrepancies exposed gaps in educational governance. Peraita and Pastor (2000) examined barriers to primary-school completion and identified a paradox whereby dropout remained persistently high despite rising overall enrolment. Logistic regression using microdata showed that dropout was not random but strongly shaped by (1) family background, including household socioeconomic conditions such as income and parental education, and (2) labour-market conditions, particularly the attraction and volatility of child and adolescent labour markets (Peraita & Pastor, 2000; No et al., 2012). Stepanović-Ilić et al. (2017) further showed that leaving school results from interacting pressures across several systemic levels: resource deprivation in economically disadvantaged communities (exosystem); weak coordination among schools, families, and local social organizations (mesosystem); and legal and inter-agency shortcomings that prevent policy commitments from becoming decisive action (macrosystem). Sustainable intervention therefore requires systemic reform rather than measures directed solely at students or teachers.

Baicai and Jingjian (2010) applied the concept of cultural capital to explain educational discontinuity in ethnic minority communities in north-western China. Although education generates higher economic and social returns for minority populations than for Han populations per unit of investment, minority families are less likely to invest in long-term schooling. The central barrier lies not only in economics but also in differences in cultural capital: traditional values, religious beliefs, and everyday practices may create an environment misaligned with formal education. Limited parental involvement in learning and the prioritization of community or religious activities after school hinder achievement and regular attendance (Li et al., 2017; Baicai & Jingjian, 2010; No et al., 2012). Policies to reduce dropout must therefore move beyond financial support to understand and incorporate local cultural characteristics into curricula (Baicai & Jingjian, 2010).

Using regression analysis, Shi et al. (2026) quantified dropout risk and found that separation from the family at an early age increased the likelihood that boarding students would leave school. Psychosocial factors moderated this relationship: positive relationships with teachers and peers acted as a "safety net," buffering the emotional deprivation and stress of boarding. Primary-school students were more sensitive to boarding conditions than secondary-school students, with negative effects intensifying at younger ages. Simić and Krstić (2017) examined the microstructure of the school environment and how schools may, intentionally or unintentionally, push students out of education. They identified three major barriers: (1) insufficiently individualized teaching, which leaves struggling learners behind; (2) inadequate on-site emotional and academic support, which heightens isolation; and (3) fractured interpersonal connections between teachers and students.

III. Research Methodology

Data collection methods

Primary data collection

Questionnaire survey: The study surveyed 215 students in Grades 2–5 at Bui Thi Xuan Primary School, Gia Lai Province. The measurement instrument was a concise self-administered questionnaire designed to suit the psychosocial characteristics and linguistic proficiency of ethnic minority primary-school students. Indicators addressed four principal variable groups: (i) learning motivation (the extent to which students enjoyed school); (ii) livelihood expectations and intentions (a comparison between occupational aspirations and actual plans after Grade 5); (iii) the family support ecosystem (the degree of parental support); and (iv) empirically observed barriers (Vietnamese-language difficulty, geographical distance, labour pressure, and household economic conditions, represented by access to new school supplies). Field data were synthesized and the causes were analysed within cultural, economic, and institutional categories.

***In-depth interviews and focus-group discussions*:** To investigate the reasons underlying decisions to leave school, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with Gia Rai students who had dropped out after primary school and with their parents. The interviews focused on economic barriers and cultural mismatches contributing to educational discontinuity, while documenting the students' current livelihoods in the informal labour market, including farm work and seasonal wage labour. Classroom observations were also conducted during Mathematics and Vietnamese lessons to record direct manifestations of language barriers and students' level of school engagement.

Secondary data collection

Secondary data were compiled from periodic reports issued by the Gia Lai Department of Education and Training and from World Bank and UNICEF social-impact reports on multidimensional poverty and child labour in the Central Highlands. The research team also reviewed relevant international studies identified through Google Scholar and ResearchGate.

Data processing and analysis

Data from the 215 questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify points of discontinuity in students' orientation by grade and ethnic group. Thematic analysis was used to code qualitative data on causes of dropout according to the theoretical framework. A SWOT matrix was employed to model the current position of young Gia Rai human resources and assess the relationship between their internal capabilities and the opportunities and threats in the local labour market, thereby informing recommendations on career guidance and school social work.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Descriptive characteristics of survey participants

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of survey participants

Class	Kinh	Gia Rai	Ba Na
2A1	6	21	7
3A2	0	13	21
4A1	0	11	22
4A2	3	10	15
4A3	0	13	0
5A1	1	13	23
5A2	7	0	18
5A3	0	18	0

Source: Research team survey data

The study sample comprised 215 students, most of whom belonged to ethnic minority groups in the survey area. Gia Rai students accounted for 47.4%, a share comparable to that of Bahnar students (44.7%), whereas Kinh students represented only 7.9% of the sample. Ethnic composition was also strongly polarized across classes: half of the participating classes included no Kinh students. This pattern reflects the concentrated residential distribution of indigenous communities in Gia Lai. It creates an educational environment that is highly homogeneous in cultural and linguistic terms, while limiting opportunities for intercultural interaction and exposure to modern non-agricultural livelihood models.

Differences in ethnic composition are especially evident in classes composed entirely of ethnic minority students. In Classes 4A3 and 5A3, Gia Rai students accounted for 100% of enrolment. In such ethnically homogeneous settings, the continued use of the mother tongue in everyday school interaction is a natural outcome, but it also creates challenges for developing Vietnamese-language proficiency. This systemic barrier makes it difficult for ethnic minority students to comprehend complex academic content at higher educational levels. Related studies identify limited proficiency in the national language as a direct cause of declining academic performance and increased dropout risk during the transition from primary to lower-secondary education (People's Deputies Newspaper, 2007).

Survey data show that the principal target group, Gia Rai students, was highly concentrated in Grades 4 and 5, the final stage of the primary cycle. Evidence from Gia Lai indicates that this is when academic pressures begin to intersect with household demands for children's participation in productive labour. Because of the subsistence-oriented agricultural economy, final-year primary students are often mobilized as supplementary workers during harvest seasons (Gia Lai Department of Education and Training, 2017). This interrupts long-term livelihood orientation as the immediate economic benefits of farm labour begin to outweigh sustainable educational goals. The absence of culturally responsive career-guidance models consequently makes it difficult for students to recognize the economic value of continued education.

4.2. Factors influencing the decision to leave school

Economic factors: Immediate labour is needed to support the family.

Economic hardship is the most direct and widespread barrier, reflected in two indicators: the capacity to provide learning resources and the need for students to participate in household livelihood activities.

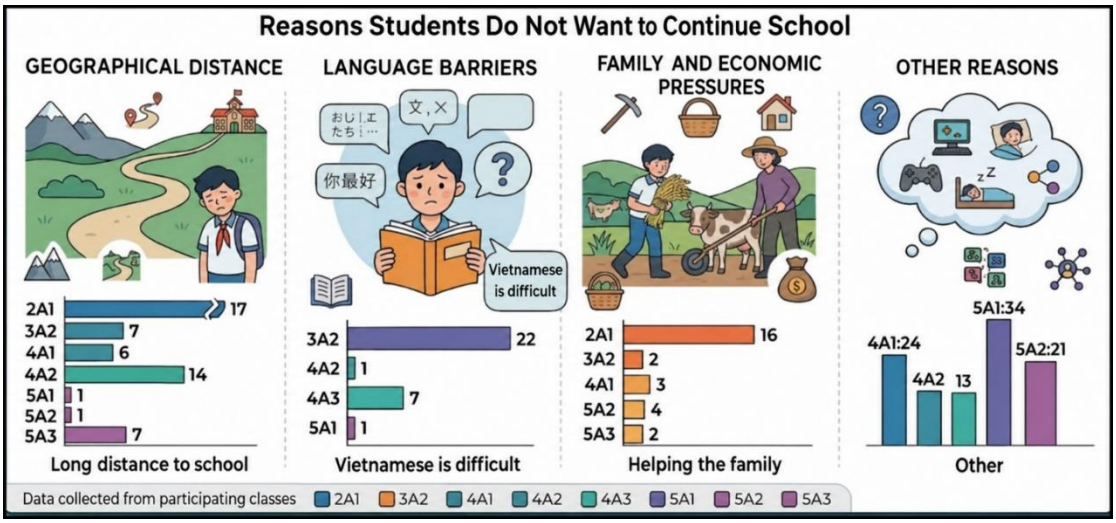

Figure 1. Reasons why students want to leave school early

Source: Research team survey data

Survey data on obstacles to school attendance reveal a multidimensional system of objective and subjective barriers. Geographical distance is substantial, particularly in Classes 2A1 (51.5%) and 4A2 (50%). This reflects the distribution of schools in remote areas of Gia Lai, where lower-secondary schools are often far from villages, creating major logistical and safety concerns during educational transition. Language difficulty ("Vietnamese is difficult") is particularly pronounced in Classes 3A2 (71%) and 4A3 (53.8%). Difficulty mastering the national language affects not only knowledge acquisition but also students' confidence and sense of belonging, thereby reducing Gia Rai and Bahnar students' motivation to remain in school (People's Deputies Newspaper, 2007).

"Helping the family" signals a direct rupture between education and livelihood, and is particularly serious in Grade 2 (48.5% in Class 2A1). That students identify household labour as a major obstacle at the beginning of primary school underscores the urgency of local household economic pressures. In many ethnic minority households in Gia Lai, children are regarded as an important labour resource for maintaining subsistence agricultural production. When livelihood pressures intensify, the long-term value of education is often subordinated to immediate labour contributions. Students then alternate between school and farm work before eventually leaving education altogether (Gia Lai Department of Education and Training, 2017).



Figure 2. Provision of new school supplies to students by grade

Source: Research team survey data

Survey data on the provision of new school supplies at the beginning of the academic year present an uneven picture of ethnic minority households' economic conditions. Overall, approximately 43.7% of students did not receive new school supplies. The shortage was particularly severe in Classes 3A2 (67.7%) and 5A3 (72.2%). A lack of basic learning materials directly obstructs classroom learning and may also cause students to feel inferior. In disadvantaged ethnic minority areas of Gia Lai, an inability to meet even minimum material requirements for education is a clear indicator of multidimensional poverty and directly threatens sustained school participation (People's Deputies Newspaper, 2007).

Class-level analysis indicates an association between ethnic composition and material investment. In Class 5A3, where all students were Gia Rai, an absolute majority lacked new school supplies. By contrast, every student in Class 5A1 received new supplies. This polarization may reflect differences in living standards across villages and variation in the effectiveness of educational assistance delivered by local authorities or charitable organizations. Nevertheless, the predominance of "No" responses in many classes indicates that annual reinvestment in school supplies remains a significant financial burden for many Gia Rai parents amid unstable agricultural incomes (Gia Lai Department of Education and Training, 2017).

The lack of new school supplies is closely linked to perceptions of education's value and to future orientation. When minimum material conditions are not secured, students may become discouraged and view schooling as a financial burden on their parents rather than a pathway to better livelihoods. This indirectly contributes to post-primary educational discontinuity. If families cannot or will not cover basic needs such as books and stationery, they are unlikely to commit to the greater costs of subsequent schooling. This reinforces children's early departure into unskilled labour to ease household financial pressure (Gia Lai Newspaper, 2024).

Cultural factors: The belief that working is more valuable than studying.

Cultural factors and community perceptions operate as persistent "soft barriers" that gradually erode the perceived value of education.

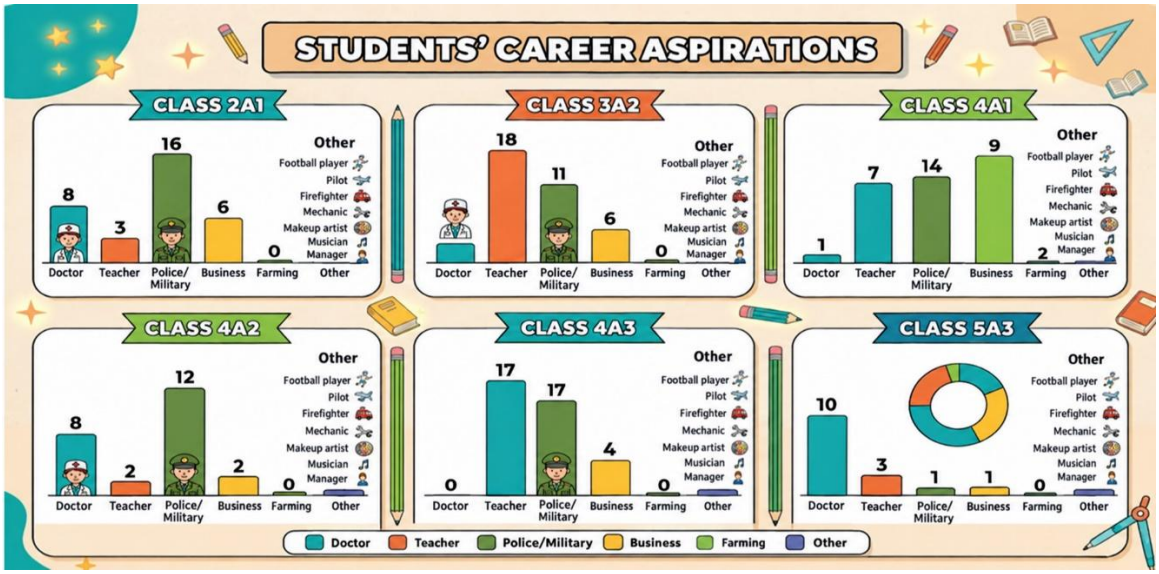

Figure 3. Students' occupational aspirations

Source: Research team survey data

Survey data on occupational aspirations show a clear concentration in the armed forces and public-service occupations. Police officer/soldier was the dominant aspiration, selected by approximately 40.5% of the sample, followed by teacher at 28.8%. This pattern reflects a traditional occupational worldview among ethnic minority students in Gia Lai, where these careers signify social status as well as stable income and welfare. Preference for state-supported occupations indicates a desire for livelihood security and the influence of locally visible occupational role models.

Business-related occupations (8.8%) and "Other" occupations – including pilot, makeup artist, and musician – accounted for approximately 7.9%. Thus, despite living in remote areas, some students, particularly in Grade 5, had begun to encounter and aspire to a more diverse modern labour market. By contrast, farming attracted very few students; it was selected mainly in Class 4A1 (27.3% of that class) and was almost absent elsewhere.

Age-related variation in aspirations reveals an important psychological pattern. In the lower grades, especially Grades 2 and 3, aspirations tend to be highly idealized, such as doctor or teacher. By Grades 4 and 5, occupational preferences diversify toward "Other" or technical occupations such as motorcycle repair. Class 4A1, which recorded the largest proportion aspiring to farm work, also had a high proportion intending to leave school to help their families. When aspirations are not supported by a specific educational pathway and economic assistance, students tend to make them more "realistic" by accepting low-skilled work or returning to traditional household livelihoods.

Institutional factors: The absence of social-work services for students at risk of dropping out

Schools currently provide academic knowledge but lack sufficient resources to implement intensive social interventions.

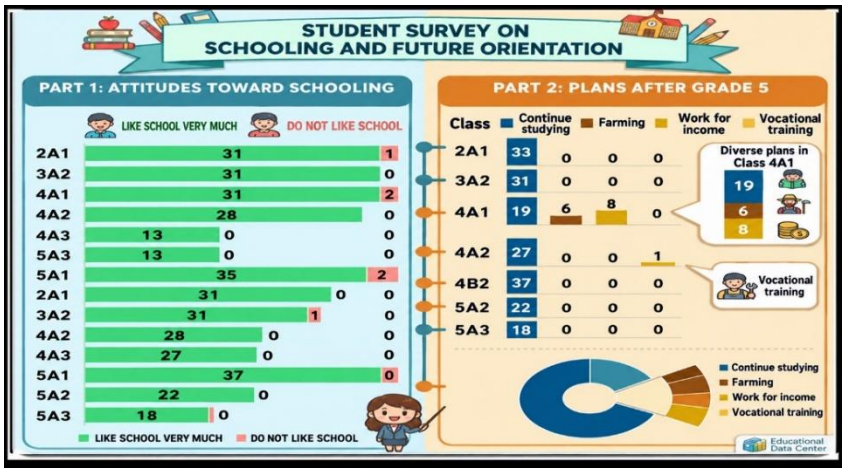

Figure 4. Survey findings on schooling and future orientation

Source: Research team survey data

Survey findings on attitudes toward school reveal a noteworthy paradox. Most students (approximately 95.8%) reported that they "liked school very much." Grade-level analysis, however, shows an emerging negative shift among students nearing the end of primary education. In Class 5A3 - composed entirely of Gia Rai students - 22.2% reported that they did "not like" school, the highest proportion in the sample. This declining motivation is often associated with difficulty comprehending Vietnamese and reduced academic self-confidence as the curriculum becomes more demanding. Insufficient psychological support and the absence of a culturally responsive, student-friendly learning environment also reinforce this change in attitude (Gia Lai Newspaper, 2024).

Expected livelihood pathways after Grade 5 vary sharply by age and awareness. In Grades 2 and 3, every student wished to "continue studying." This pattern changed abruptly in Grade 4, especially in Class 4A1, where only 57.6% intended to continue their education. A considerable proportion instead chose "work to earn money" (24.2%) or "farming" (18.2%). The emergence of short-term livelihood choices during primary school demonstrates the strong influence of household economic circumstances on ethnic minority children's thinking. Because many families in Gia Lai continue to regard children's labour as an important agricultural household resource, early intentions to leave school and help the family pose a major risk to the sustainability of local education (Gia Lai Department of Education and Training, 2017).

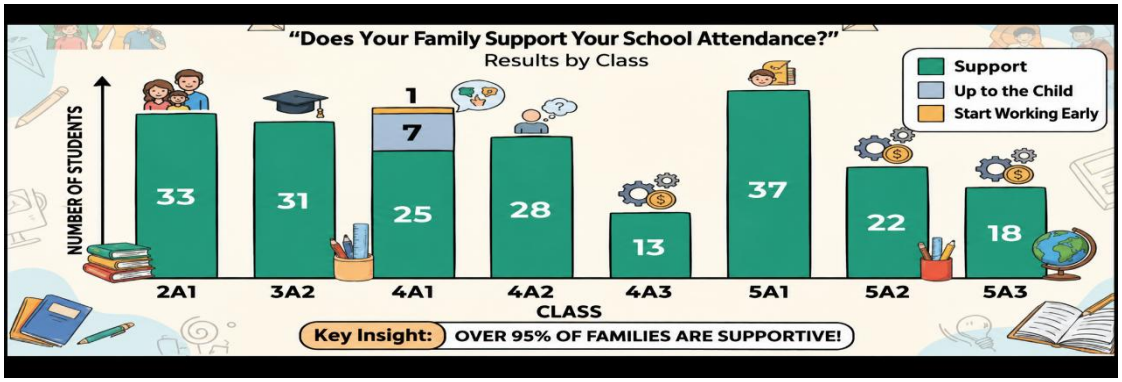

Figure 5. Family support for primary-school students

Source: Research team survey data

Data on family support reveal an overall positive pattern but also concerning variations in parental commitment. Approximately 96.3% of families supported school attendance. However, responses such as "It is up to the child" (3.3%) and "Start working early" (0.5%) in Grade 4, particularly Class 4A1, expose gaps in the family-based educational safety net. Although small in absolute number, the "It is up to the child" response indicates inadequate guidance or parental disengagement from the child's educational pathway. Among ethnic minority communities in Gia Lai, such disengagement can precede dropout because children who do not yet understand education's long-term value are easily drawn toward immediate economic gains (Gia Lai Department of Education and Training, 2017).

The concentration of less supportive responses in Grades 4 and 5 suggests a pattern of "substitutable resource pressure" within Gia Rai households. As children grow and become capable of participating in agricultural production, family support may shift toward neutrality or expectations of economic contribution. Requests that students "start working early" demonstrate a preference for short-term livelihood benefits over long-term investment in human capital through education. Local field reports identify poverty and labour shortages during peak coffee and pepper harvest seasons as direct causes of parents shifting from support for education toward encouragement to leave school (Gia Lai Newspaper, 2024). In remote ethnic minority communities, when families offer no clear directionas reflected in "It is up to the child" response – students can lose direction when they encounter academic difficulty. Combined with the language and cultural barriers discussed above, this creates a cumulative force pushing students out of general education. Weak family guidance is therefore a critical link in the disruption of sustainable livelihood orientation among the younger generation (People's Deputies Newspaper, 2007).

4.3. Livelihood orientation among the younger generation

4.3.1. Traditional livelihood group

Preference for purely agricultural livelihoods reflects continuity in household and community production practices. In Gia Lai, these livelihoods are associated with key industrial crops such as coffee and pepper. Students' early selection of this segment indicates a mechanical fit between their current labour capacity (unskilled labour)

and household assets (farmland). From a sustainable-development perspective, however, entering the labour market before completing compulsory education creates barriers to technical knowledge, traps young workers in low-productivity cycles, and limits their ability to adopt modern cultivation standards.

Box 4.1. Case study of early livelihood acceptance in Class 4A1

Data from Class 4A1 reveal the early formation of occupational trajectories. Six students intended to enter agricultural work immediately after Grade 5, while nine identified agriculture as their future occupation. For these students, participation in production was no longer viewed as temporary assistance to the family but had become their anticipated principal livelihood pathway.

Source: Research team survey data

4.3.2. Informal labour and labour migration

Students choosing informal local work or migration for employment represent a disruption of the educational trajectory in exchange for short-term economic returns. Urgent household financial constraints commonly drive this tendency, making paid work appear to be the only means of survival. More concerning, the data reveal an absence of orientation toward skilled vocational training, reflecting a serious lack of career information and pathways for professional capacity development among ethnic minority students.

Box 4.2. Relationship between financial barriers and intended labour migration

Field data show that economic pressure directly shaped students' short-term livelihood choices: eight students in Class 4A1 intended to work for income immediately after primary school and were likely to enter industrial zones or take unskilled urban jobs. Eighteen students in Class 4A1 and 13 in Class 5A3 lacked new school supplies entirely. Deprivation of basic educational resources creates conditions conducive to early school leaving. Only one student in the entire sample (Class 4A2) intended to undertake vocational training, demonstrating a major gap between general and vocational education at the local level.

Source: Research team survey data

4.3.3. SWOT assessment of young human resources

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
1. Aspirations for high-status occupations: Some students maintain strong intrinsic motivation toward public service and education careers. Seventeen students in Class 5A1 and 16 in Class 2A1 aspire to join the armed forces; 18 students in Class 3A2 selected teaching. 2. Positive attitudes toward education at an early stage: The number of students who "like school very much" is high in Grades 2 and 3 (31/33 in Class 2A1; 31/31 in Class 3A2). 3. Indigenous cultural-capital advantage: Students possess deep knowledge of local natural conditions and cultivation practices.	1. Systemic language barrier: Twenty-two of 31 students in Class 3A2 face major language difficulties. Limited Vietnamese proficiency hinders access to technical knowledge and advanced training. 2. Early discontinuity in pathway orientation: Fourteen students in Class 4A1 shifted early from "continuing education" to "earning money," indicating that the transition from education to unskilled livelihoods begins during primary school. 3. Lack of career information: The proportion choosing vocational education is virtually 0% (except one student in Class 4A2), revealing limited awareness of vocational training and the modern labour market.
Opportunities	**Threats**
1. Supportive legal framework: Policies on career education and student streaming (e.g., Decision No. 522/QD-TTg). 2. Demand for a highly skilled agricultural workforce: Opportunities to join the value chains of Gia Lai's key products, including coffee and pepper. 3. The presence of school social work: Increasing attention to psychological counselling and early career guidance.	1. Low-value livelihood trap: Household financial pressure pushes students prematurely into the informal labour market. 2. Family disengagement and household barriers: Parents may leave decisions entirely to children or require them to work early. 3. Market volatility: Unstable agricultural prices and natural hazards in the Central Highlands.

IV. Discussion

The findings indicate that post-primary educational discontinuity among students in Gia Lai is driven by three principal groups of barriers: economic, cultural, and institutional. Based on the SWOT matrix, four strategic groups underpin the recommendations below. The SO strategy – leveraging strengths to capitalize on opportunities – combines students' learning motivation and aspirations for socially valued occupations with the policy framework for student streaming and career guidance (e.g., Decision No. 522/QD-TTg) to renew culturally

responsive career education. The ST strategy – leveraging strengths to mitigate threats – uses indigenous cultural capital and younger students' positive attitudes toward school to prevent entry into low-value livelihood traps under rising financial pressure, through a psychosocial support network connecting schools and families. The WO strategy – overcoming weaknesses by using opportunities mobilizes the growing role of school social work to address systemic language barriers and limited career information. The WT strategy, minimizing weaknesses and threats focuses on targeted economic support to reduce both household financial barriers and exposure to labour-market and agricultural-price volatility. Specifically:

First, a psychosocial support system should be established through a school social work model. The foremost priority is to formalize and strengthen the role of school social workers in ethnic minority education. Rather than assigning counselling to homeroom teachers who already carry heavy professional workloads, schools need a specialized unit capable of intensive intervention for students at risk of educational discontinuity. School social workers should conduct household visits to identify actual barriers, develop individualized support plans, connect families with financial resources from social organizations, and mobilize communities to change Gia Rai parents' perceptions. Such a network would alleviate psychological pressure and ensure that students are not left behind because of sudden economic shocks or cultural conflict.

Second, career education should be redesigned to respond to local culture and livelihoods. Schools should restructure career-guidance content from the primary level onward so that knowledge is connected to the lived realities of Gia Rai communities. Career guidance should shift from theoretical occupational introductions to experiential learning focused on the Central Highlands' economic strengths, including high-tech agriculture, forest-conservation management, and cultural ecotourism. Bilingual career-learning materials and successful local ethnic minority role models can help students develop a long-term understanding of education's value. When students recognize education as the most effective pathway to higher labour productivity and improved family livelihoods, their motivation to remain in school will strengthen and their tendency to accept spontaneous, low-value work after primary school will diminish.

Third, targeted economic support policies should be improved and linked to educational commitments. Local authorities should consider periodic subsidies or scholarships tied to attendance and academic outcomes rather than one-off assistance. This mechanism would create a direct economic commitment between schools and families, enabling parents to keep their children in education rather than sending them prematurely into the labour market. Investment in boarding infrastructure and transport access in remote parts of Gia Lai is also essential to remove geographical barriers and provide maximum safety and convenience during the transition from primary school to higher levels of education.

Fourth, the multicultural competence of administrators and teachers in ethnic minority areas should be strengthened. Professional development should address not only local languages but also educational anthropology and ethnic psychology. Training should help teachers recognize differences between the cultural capital of Gia Rai and majority students and adapt learner-centred methods that respect local identity. A discrimination-free school environment in which Gia Rai traditions are incorporated into lessons and extracurricular activities can inspire students. When teachers understand students culturally, they become important guides who help them overcome language barriers and low self-confidence, thereby substantially reducing post-primary school leaving.

V. Conclusion

This study clarified the current situation and the core factors disrupting the educational trajectories of Gia Rai students in Gia Lai Province after primary school. Although most students held positive attitudes toward school, their livelihood orientation was strongly affected by opportunity costs and household economic pressures. Three principal groups of barriers were identified: economic barriers (the demand for early labour), cultural and linguistic barriers (the gap between the mother tongue and academic Vietnamese), and systemic barriers (the absence of professional support networks such as school social work). The proposed interventions provide a scientific basis for educational policymaking in ethnic minority areas.

Comparison with previous empirical research reveals several important similarities. Consistent with Hoang Thi Hai Yen's (2025) findings in Lai Chau, household labour pressure directly pushed Gia Rai students toward early school leaving. The gap between official statistics and educational discontinuity observed in the field echoes Lu et al.'s (2016) findings in north-western China. Peraita and Pastor's (2000) conclusions about the influence of family background and labour markets are supported by data on inadequate school supplies and the shift toward unskilled work among Gia Rai students. The findings also reinforce Stepanović-Ilić et al.'s (2017) view that educational discontinuity results from interacting systemic layers rather than from students alone, and align with Baicai and Jingjian (2010) regarding the central role of the cultural-capital gap between families and formal schools. A notable difference is that, whereas the reviewed international studies often emphasize religion or ethnicity, this study identifies Vietnamese-language barriers as particularly prominent among Gia Rai students in Gia Lai.

Despite meeting its objectives, the study has several limitations. First, resource constraints limited the survey to selected sites in Gia Lai Province, preventing it from capturing the full diversity of Gia Rai socioeconomic life across different localities. Second, questionnaire administration to primary-school students was sometimes complicated by language barriers, potentially introducing errors in the expression of abstract concepts concerning future intentions. Future research should expand the survey scale and examine more deeply how digital transformation and social media influence students' occupational awareness.

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