

The critical need for reciprocity between educational migrants and communities for continuing education and socio-cultural capital in Laos

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Abstract: *Reciprocity between student success and community support has emerged as a strong theme in a phenomenological case study that was conducted amongst post-primary educational migrant students¹ in Laos. Students clearly articulated their dependence upon community support and the ways in which they gave back to their communities in exchange for their continuing education. The descriptions of their experiences were indicative of hierarchical interdependence and highlighted the effects of urbanisation on educational migrants and their lifelong learning. This study draws on Bourdieu's capital theory to understand community and reciprocity as indicators of cultural and social capital. Findings revealed that building relationships between students and their communities is essential to advancing post-primary education in Laos.*

Keywords: *community support, educational development, educational migrants, Laos, post-primary school education, socio-cultural capital*

Introduction

The reciprocal relationship between communities and students in developing contexts is an emerging area of interest in educational research due to recent moves away from traditional measures of school achievement towards the growing concern of sustainable community and social development (see Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Honeyman, 2010; Morarji, 2010; Masino and Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). This phenomenological case study that was conducted in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) shows the critical importance of social and cultural capital for education development and lifelong learning. For many Lao youth, there are no post-primary school educational opportunities in their hometowns or surrounding regions, and therefore educational migration from rural areas to urban centres is the only opportunity to continue formal schooling. Many students make

this migration in their late teenage and young adulthood years, facing the associated challenges of being viewed as a minority (whether ethnically or in terms of power) and as poor in unfamiliar urban settings (Faming, 2019). Data analysis revealed that reciprocal relationships between post-primary school students and wider communities in Laos are critical to continuing education.

Post-primary school experiences for students from rural areas in Laos may be somewhat likened to the first-year university experience in other cultures due to the need to leave the family home or village to undertake further study. Similar studies in India (Da Costa, 2007; Bhagavatheeswaran *et al.*, 2016; Morarji, 2016; Ramanaik *et al.*, 2018; Wadhwa, 2018) and Papua New Guinea (Ryan *et al.*, 2017) have identified many relational factors between communities, students and education systems that influence educational attainment and outcomes, including the student's and family's position within their community, gender, caste and familial roles. In Laos, students also grapple with

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ethnic socio-cultural hierarchies (Faming, 2019). Other case studies in the United Kingdom (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Maunder, 2018) and South Africa (McMillan, 2016) have found that friends and family members are important for emotional support for those pursuing tertiary education. Conversely, Morarji's (2010, 2016) research in India warns that rural educated populations lack sentiments of community responsibility or concern because education cultivates individualism. However, Chea and Huijsmans (2018: 39) show that educational opportunities for rural youth in Laos and Cambodia contribute to 'becoming someone' within the community, where personal achievement contributes to the esteem of the whole community. Moreover, in a comparative study of two educational programmes in Honduras, Honeyman (2010: 600) discussed the relationships between students and community and concluded that different school systems can create changes in students' social responsibility, which she defines as the 'personal investment in the well-being of others and society as a whole'. This indicates the cyclical nature of the relationship between community and education, as not only can the role of community facilitate or challenge educational achievement, but schooling can in turn influence a student's relationship with his or her community. In a systematic policy review, Masino and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) theorised community involvement as one of the three central interventions necessary to improve student learning and achievement. Despite the advancements these studies have made, the relationship between youth migration, community support and education remains largely under-examined, particularly in developing contexts, warranting further study (Hashim, 2007).

In response to this research opportunity, this study posed the following research question: *What supports and challenges Lao youth from rural areas while living and studying in Luang Prabang?* To address this question, a phenomenological case study was conducted using Bourdieu's capital theory to understand the forms of capital and their manifestations in Laos that support urban educational pursuit. Findings show that social and cultural capital are essential to post-primary school achievement in Laos, as observed through horizontal (e.g. friendship) and vertical (e.g. social hierarchy) interdependence.

This research is significant in an era when the effectiveness of education is increasingly measured by achievement metrics (e.g. Unicef, 2012, 2013) and comparative league tables (e.g. OECD, 2018), as our approach foregrounds the importance of social development over assessment outcomes. Indeed, educational outcomes are directly impacted by social security and development. In this study in Laos, reciprocity of capital and conversions between social, cultural and economic capital within networks, were found to be critical for educational development.

Background to the Lao context

Laos is the least densely populated country in Southeast Asia. While 60% of the population lives in rural settings, annual urbanisation rates are high at over 4% (United Nations, 2015; CIA World Factbook, 2017). There are various push and pull factors identified as causes of urbanisation in Laos, including opportunities for employment, higher incomes and education (Stuart-Fox, 2007; Phouxay *et al.*, 2010). Reasons for leaving rural areas include decreases in farmland sizes, lack of economic opportunities and low standards of living (Howe and Sims, 2011; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013). Youth (ages 15–29), students, and the literate and educated most commonly move to urban centres (Phouxay *et al.*, 2010). Notwithstanding this phenomenon, the relationship between urbanisation and poverty reduction in Laos remains contested (see High, 2006; Rigg, 2007; Phouxay *et al.*, 2010; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013).

Ethnic tensions have contributed to urbanisation challenges in Laos (Stuart-Fox, 2007). The Lao population is ethnically very diverse with 49 officially recognised ethnic groups; however, there are estimated to be as many as 100 or 200 different ethnic identities across the country (Evans, 2001; Pholsena, 2002). The three largest ethnic groups are the ethnic Lao, Khmou, and Hmong (Turner, 2017). There is a notable 'ethnic hierarchy' with the ethnic Lao at the apex (Evans, 2001), likely contributing to educational inequalities for the smaller ethnic groups, which are exacerbated by geographic isolation and enforced resettlement (see Kampe, 1997; Stuart-Fox, 2009; Howe and Sims, 2011; Rigg, 2018; Faming, 2019). Ethnic Lao are the most likely to

urbanise as ethnic minorities resist urbanisation due to fears of discrimination and lack of means to move (Stuart-Fox, 2007). Educational migration is also fraught with ethnic socio-cultural hierarchical difficulties as rural youth are often marginalised as poor and of lower social hierarchy regardless of their educational achievements (Faming, 2019). Culturally, urbanisation presents problems as Evans (2001) argues that hierarchical interdependence is the central value embedded in Lao culture: parents raise their children through their youth until the children are able to reciprocate the support in return, creating a tight family structure in society. This cultural value is demonstrated in this study's data set, presented below. High (2006) suggests the fluidity in these structures, which can extend beyond static conceptualisations of the 'village', as well as state-promoted 'solidarity' beyond the family unit.

Education rates are rising in Laos (Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012; UNDP, 2015; Warr *et al.*, 2015; Lafont *et al.*, 2017), particularly following a significant education and literacy push following the 1975 revolution (Creak, 2018). While the mean years of schooling in the country is only 5.2 years, the expected number of years of schooling for students in 2017 was 11.2 years (UNDP, 2017), indicating a substantial rise in the length of time spent in formal schooling per student. It is estimated that 72.8% of females and 87.1% of males aged 15 or above are literate, with a national average of 79.9% of the population (CIA World Factbook, 2017; Lafont *et al.*, 2017). Ethno-linguistic minority households experience lower educational attainment, including literacy and attendance rates (Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012).

Enrolment rates for school-aged children decrease with each level of education in Laos. Eighty-five per cent of primary school aged children are attending school, while only 45% of children of secondary school-age (Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012). This number is further reduced at the tertiary schooling ages; about 18% of the respective aged youth are enrolled in tertiary education (United Nations, 2015). For the students enrolled, attendance rates are very low. For example, the secondary school net attendance ratio is reported at 45% (Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012). Children of the elite and wealthy, of educated parents, living in

urban areas, and of the Lao ethnic and linguistic majority have the highest literacy scores and enrolment and attendance rates, with these patterns of inequalities perpetuated over generations (Stuart-Fox, 2007, 2009; Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013). This is likely closely related to the history of the Lao education system being built around Buddhist monastic and Westernised elite education (Rehbein, 2007; McDaniel, 2008).

Laos follows a 12-year primary and secondary school system: 5 years of primary, 4 years of lower secondary and 3 years of upper secondary. The Lao education system is constrained by lack of funding, underqualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure and resources (Rehbein, 2007; Moxom and Hayden, 2015; Lafont *et al.*, 2017). Less than 3% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on education, proportionately lower than most other ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member countries (Stuart-Fox, 2007, 2009; United Nations, 2015); however, a rise in public spending on education has been observed (Warr *et al.*, 2015). The Lao Government has pledged to increase the allocated budget on education and has prioritised education in the Sixth National Socio-Economic Development Plan (IMF, 2008; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013). Increases in the number of schools, students and teachers have helped raise the educational levels in the country, as evidenced in the statistics above. Due to these improvements, younger generations are reaching higher levels of education (Estudillo *et al.*, 2013). Tertiary education is also increasingly available. The government re-established the National University of Laos in 1995, which had been closed during the Lao revolution, and there are now five public universities and many teacher training and private higher-education schools across the country (Evans, 2001; Moxom and Hayden, 2015).

To date, the experiences of Lao students have not been widely researched. Understanding the student experience is important for continuing education development as post-secondary school education is only undertaken by approximately 18% of the population in Laos (United Nations, 2015), and a clearer picture of the situation will help identify needed support to encourage further education and lifelong learning in Laos. In general, educational research

and related literature in Laos is scant due to the constraints of a developing context. Most educational literature in Laos is quantitative and statistics centred (see Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012; Unicef, 2012, 2013; Warr *et al.*, 2015; Pasanen, 2017), often overlooking the uneven processes of development (Rigg, 2018). Despite indications of increasing levels of achievement and prevalence of formal schooling (IMF, 2008; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013; The World Bank, 2017), qualitative research into the student experience, with the aim of reducing inequality and poverty, has only just begun to emerge (e.g. Faming, 2019). Our study investigated the enabling factors and challenges for educational migration to understand lived experiences of students undertaking post-primary education in Laos.

Conceptualising student experience in Laos: Bourdieu's capital theory

To frame our study of the relationships between community, students and education, we draw upon Bourdieu's (1984, 2007) theory of capital. Bourdieu argues that capital, or accumulated labour, can take on multiple forms, economic capital, social capital and cultural capital, all of which need to be considered in order to understand the social world. Each of the types of capital can be converted into the others, but at a cost of time and labour (Bourdieu, 2007). Thus, the acquisition of one form of capital simultaneously depends on the other forms (Pinxten and Lievens, 2014). Bourdieu views the social world as relational, whereby the possession of each of the three forms of capital determines an individual's degree of power in different fields, or social settings (Bourdieu, 1984; Krarup and Munk, 2016).

Bourdiesian approaches to capital are commonly employed in researching education, both in the Global North and Global South (e.g. Sullivan, 2001; Wang, 2012; Brouwer *et al.*, 2016; Wadhwa, 2018). As an alternative to the tendency to study barriers to educational attainment, or 'deficit theory syndrome' (Morrow, 1999; Pinxten and Lievens, 2014), a Bourdiesian approach examines what facilitates student success. Integral to Bourdieu's framework is the relationship between the three

forms of capital. Therefore, cultural capital, in our case education, is fundamentally related to economic and social capital, an idea that has often been excluded from studies examining the relationship between educational attainment and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Krarup and Munk, 2016). Other studies have proven the utility of Bourdieu's capital theory in the Lao context: Rehbein (2007) suggests that access to post-primary education in Laos is dependent on social and economic capital, and Durham (2017) drew similar conclusions in regards to healthcare.

Economic capital is the most easily recognisable form of capital, given its direct convertibility into money (Bourdieu, 2007).

Social capital is a 'networks-based resource that is available in relationships and consequently accrues to individuals' (Pinxten and Lievens, 2014: 1098). Social capital can take the form of kinship relationships, group or institutional memberships and other forms of connections (Johnstonbaugh, 2018). Exchanges within the network, whether material or symbolic, function to maintain and reproduce it (Bourdieu, 2007), a concept that was evident in this study.

Cultural capital exists in three manifestations: the embodied state (such as language abilities), the objectified state (such as possession of art) and the institutionalised state (such as academic qualifications) (Bourdieu, 2007). Cultural capital challenges assumptions that differences in academic achievement are due to differences in natural abilities, and instead suggests that these differences are accrued over time, through lived experiences and early childhood socialisation that occurred in the home (Bourdieu, 2007; Johnstonbaugh, 2018). Particularly through the education system, cultural capital functions to reproduce social differences and serve as a basis for inclusion or exclusion (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). The effects of cultural capital are evident in this study.

Methodology: A study of educational migration in Luang Prabang

This study emerged from the first author's experience living in Luang Prabang. While known internationally as a UNESCO World Heritage Site², domestically the city has become an

education hub. Many people met working in the tourist sector, mostly in hospitality and restaurant service, were educational migrants from rural areas who had moved to Luang Prabang to pursue post-primary education. Migration presented as a very difficult transition, with educational migrants having to overcome many barriers in the process of pursuing post-primary education in Luang Prabang. Seeking to understand student experiences and perspectives of post-primary school education demanded qualitative research (Bryman and Teevan, 2005; Mayoux, 2006) and necessitated the use of phenomenology, a study of lived experience (Creswell, 2013). This phenomenological study is framed as a case study, as it is located within particular boundaries (Yin, 2018), as described here.

Data collection

Data were collected by the first author in Luang Prabang, Laos, over four months in 2014. Participants described their experiences in semi-structured interviews, which allowed for clarification questions and deep exploration of phenomena as points of interest arose in conversation (Willis, 2017). Interviews were typically 30 minutes in duration, but varied due to the open-ended nature of the questions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Researcher observations were qualified within interviews as this is a study of the participants' lived experiences and it was important that participants' experiences were foregrounded in the study.

Data analysis

In recognition of the difficulty (or impossibility) of accurately translating knowledge (Rose, 1997), the first author and a native Lao speaker each translated each interview transcript and then together discussed the chosen translations in an effort to determine the most meaningful translation as possible. Responses given in interviews were triangulated with contextual knowledge gained from over two prior years living in Luang Prabang. Four rounds of coding were conducted (see Cope, 2010; Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The first two rounds of manual coding produced 21 and 45 codes, respectively. Data were then imported into

NVivo™ for the third round of coding, which produced 33 codes and sub-codes. Data was organised into themes, categories and codes, and all codes with fewer than three pieces of datum were either clustered or removed. In this process, it became clear that community support and reciprocity were the most common themes in the data set. Using these emergent themes from the first three rounds of coding, a final round of axial coding was completed to ensure trustworthiness of results. These salient themes of community support and reciprocity are the focus of the findings below.

Participants

Participants were Lao nationals who were undertaking upper secondary or tertiary study, living in Luang Prabang, who had moved to the town from outside of the Luang Prabang district. Students who met this criteria were recruited through snowball and opportunistic sampling (Punch and Oancea, 2014) using the first author's networks in the town. The research participants, of which two were female and 10 were male, ranged from 16 to 23 years old. The 12 participants represented seven institutions: three participants were in upper secondary school, two were between high school and tertiary education, five were in tertiary education and two had just graduated from tertiary education the month earlier. Participants in higher education programmes were in a variety of programmes: accounting, culinary training, law, paramedics and teaching. Half of the participants had immediate or extended family members also living in Luang Prabang, while the other half did not. At the time of data collection, five participants were working as well as studying. Four participants were living in private accommodation, seven participants were living in a shared room or dormitory and one student was living at an extended family member's house. Seven participants could travel to their hometown in two to five hours, while the other five participants could travel home in 6–10 hours. All participants indicated they moved to Luang Prabang to pursue educational opportunities. Other motives included work, becoming a Buddhist monk, wanting to experience living in a new location, and general interest in the town. Phenomenological studies typically

recruit between 5 and 25 participants (Creswell *et al.*, 2007). It is important to note that all participants had experienced the phenomenon of educational migration to Luang Prabang. To this end, data saturation was achieved when researchers began to identify common themes during interviews. Complying with research protocols to protect participant confidentiality, all identifiable information has been removed from the presentation of data.

Limitations of the study

All knowledge is partial and situated, mediated by the researcher(s)' positionality (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). The first author is a Canadian female, with the ability to speak Lao and has spent multiple years living in Luang Prabang intermittently. This offered both deep contextual understanding, as well as an entry point to the research. The first author conducted the interviews with the assistance of a research assistant, a Lao male. While interviews were conducted in casual conversation-like settings, power inequities remain between the researchers and researched, and participant responses were likely shaped by their impressions of the primary researcher and her Lao assistant. The findings and interpretations of this study are thus shaped by the authors' analysis as non-Lao researchers. The authors embody cultural humility in our research practices, embracing the uncertainty in any reflections of knowledge production and positionality (Rose, 1997; Willis and Allen, 2011). Furthermore, the study was designed with limited resources and the findings are specific to the geographical, time and financial constraints of the researchers. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate the need for further research into the criticality of social connectivity and capital for educational success for educational migrants in Luang Prabang.

Findings: The importance of cultural and social capital in educational migration

The data set presented a wide range of factors that supported and challenged students while living and studying in Luang Prabang. The salient role of social and cultural capital, as observed through three levels of community

support, in student success in post-primary education in Laos was evident in the data set. Every participant had received at least one form of community support in their educational migration and post-primary educational pursuits.

The data analysis process revealed the significance of community support at three levels:

- (i) support from the wider community,
- (ii) support from friendship groups and
- (iii) support from family members.

Nearly all participants discussed current or aspired reciprocity between their family members and the wider community.

Support from the wider community

Wider community support beyond participants' immediate family and friendship groups was found to be significant in students' ability to urbanise for education. For some participants, this came through advice from community members on how to move to the city; for others, it was a community member showing them around Luang Prabang or helping them arrange accommodation.

Champa found community support from her employer. She stressed how significant her boss was in helping her learn to live in Luang Prabang:

Frankly, they taught me everything ... my boss is a good person, she taught me whatever I did not know. If I speak English wrong, she will fix it. She is a good boss, she taught me a lot, how to work, helped me with my studying and comprehension. I can ask her for help if I need. (Champa, female, age 23)

Therefore, while Champa was pursuing formal education, her employer also helped her build cultural capital, which takes time to accumulate through experience (Bourdieu, 2007). Champa expressed that in addition to wages, she gained embodied cultural capital, such as communication skills, work skills and studying skills. The close relationship with her employer also expanded her social capital, so that she felt comfortable asking for help or assistance if needed.

More broadly, several participants noted that the move to the Luang Prabang community alone had helped their educational achievement. A common sentiment was that people in

the city seemed more knowledgeable, and thus encouraged educational pursuit, and that meeting new people in the city also helped their development. Data from Seng, Janto and Somvang's interviews are provided here:

If I see people who have education, it makes me want to change myself. If I still live in a small city, I won't see people who have education and I won't be able to change myself. (Seng, male, age 20)

The good thing about [Luang Prabang] is that it is a developed place. It makes me more knowledgeable. At home, it is not developed, no studying, so no knowledge. (Janto, male, age 19)

At first I came to work in the city and I saw many things here, but in the country I didn't see things that could help better or develop myself, so I decided to move to the city to study and work to develop my life, to study many things ... Comparing people in the city to people in my village, people in the city have more knowledge; they are better. (Somvang, male, age 19)

We can interpret from these quotations the value placed on embodied cultural capital similar to Champa's experience above. These examples raised by participants represent the importance of 'familiarity with the dominant culture ... [and] the ability to understand and use "educated" language' (Sullivan, 2001: 893) inherent to cultural capital and illustrate its importance in lifelong learning. Moreover, urbanisation is a very present challenge for post-primary school education in Laos (Evans, 2001; Rigg, 2007; Phouxay *et al.*, 2010), and this data demonstrates the significant differences in intellectual and cultural capital between rural and urban communities, whether actual or perceived, and accord with Faming's (2019) findings. That four participants talked about a lack of knowledge in rural settings and more knowledge in urban settings is significant. Whether learning to speak in a Luang Prabang accent, learning to navigate a large and densely populated city or learning from a more diverse population, each example portrays the time required and yet the perceived and lived benefits of acquiring cultural

capital. [Correction added on 26 November 2019, after first online publication: the preceding sentence has been corrected.]

The challenges of urbanisation in education migrant communities

Reiterating the importance of community support and the risks associated with an absence of support (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Masino and Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; McMillan, 2016; Maunder, 2018), data analysis also revealed that participants felt the challenges of urbanisation in absence of a strong community. This was observed through participant feelings of isolation while living in Luang Prabang, and difficulties adapting to the new community there. Data indicated a common feeling of homesickness among participants, particularly just after moving to Luang Prabang. Indeed, several participants mentioned this directly:

I felt homesick. I missed my parents because it is long and is very different from home so I felt very homesick. (Seng, male, age 20)

When I arrived here I missed my parents because I did not know anything ... I really missed my parents. (Lek, male, age 21)

I miss home sometimes because I have not been to a developing area before. In the countryside, it is not developing, so living where it is already developed makes me miss my parents and siblings. (Khamla, male, age 21)

These comments reflect the everyday challenges for young educational migrants. While gaining cultural capital during residency in the town, these quotations highlight that it can be disorienting and upsetting to feel differences in cultural capital from one's surroundings. This led to feelings of homesickness and longing for the familiar and the social networks at home. For some participants, these feelings were compounded by other challenges of living away from home, mainly being sick while alone.

In this city, there are many challenges. For example, I live far away from my parents. When I get sick I have to look after myself, mostly by myself. (Somvang, male, age 19)

When asked what are the greatest challenges or preoccupations while living in Luang Prabang, Noi similarly replied:

I'm scared of being sick, I'm far away from my mom. (Noi, female, age 22)

In addition to leaving family members behind in their hometown, the participants also left behind their friendship groups. Data analysis showed that creating or maintaining a social life in the urban centre was one of the greatest challenges for participants, creating further isolation. When asked what was the biggest challenge of living in Luang Prabang, Lek and Vong each had similar responses:

Making friends ... It is hard because I am new. (Lek, male, age 21)

My most challenging problem is that I don't have friends yet. (Vong, male age 22)

Bourdieu (2007) stresses that social capital includes both friendship groups and kin. Participants emphasised the personal stress of being without community members, and thus the effects of social capital, as most of them left behind all of their social networks in their village. Faming's (2019) research shows that isolation of educational migrants in urban settings in Laos may also be compounded by socio-cultural hierarchies where rural youth are perceived to have no social standing.

The data also showed the barriers that a limited social life created for participants. Finding a job, going out or exploring the city and school-work were all mentioned as activities that were constrained by a lack of friendships. Janto had a difficult experience with this:

It is hard to make friends and to find a job because I have not been here before ... Like friends to ask, "Is it good to do this or bad to do this?" ... I feel sad that I don't have many friends. (Janto, male, age 19)

Champa mentioned a lot of fighting while she lived in a dormitory with 21 people:

I had to tell myself to be patient because I had already left my village. There are many people

from different provinces; sometimes you cannot get along with them ... I met new people. I came from a different town and had to change my speaking, which I adapted a lot. In my village, we all speak the same. (Champa, female, age 23)

While she had lived in the city for five years of university, she was still having trouble asking for support from friends in her last year:

When I wrote my final report last month before I graduated, it was the hardest time in the past five years because my knowledge of computers is basic and is not good so it is hard for me to write a report. Sometimes I wanted to ask for help from other people, but you know asking for help from other people is not easy. (Champa, female, age 23)

Janto and Champa thus illustrate their limitations without social capital in the city, and their desires to lean on social networks for support and conversions to cultural capital.

For some participants, isolation was compounded by fears of living in the city. Several participants mentioned being afraid of crime, theft and strangers. These fears were resonated both in living accommodations and going out at night-time. Again, these feelings of being unfamiliar with the dominant culture, and thus not possessing the cultural capital to feel comfortable in the new environment, created obstacles for participants.

Reciprocity towards the community

The relationship between the educational migrants and their communities was not unidirectional. Ten of the 12 participants spoke of varying forms of reciprocity towards their communities. This was again seen across multiple scales. The data showed that often the motivation for pursuing post-primary education was to benefit one's community.

Khamla said he was pursuing tertiary education in order to support his parents:

I don't want them to work hard. If I graduate from university, I can help them. (Khamla, male, age 21)

In this quotation, we interpret Khamla's objective to institutionalise cultural capital, through

academic qualifications, and thus use it to benefit his networks. Institutionalised cultural capital is also much easier to convert into economic capital (Bourdieu, 2007), therefore making it easier for urban graduates to financially support their families.

Several participants also mentioned either currently sending money home to their parents, or planning to do so once they could afford to or after they graduated. Multiple participants referred to a progression of reciprocity in terms of sending money, from arriving in the town and receiving money from their networks, to working towards financial independence, and ultimately sending money home to parents and other family members. In addition to economic capital, participants demonstrated reciprocity towards their home communities in other forms. For example, Janto was balancing his educational pursuits with contributing to his family home. He said that he returns home every Saturday and Sunday to help his parents, and goes home during summer holidays to help them cultivate rice. Similarly, Seng mentioned sending goods home to his family, in particular medicine. Vong applied to teacher's college based on what he believed his hometown needed most. When asked why he wanted to be a teacher, Vong replied:

I want to develop myself, and my village.
(Vong, male, age 22)

Other participants planned to move back to their hometowns after graduation to help their home communities, for example as trained paramedics or teachers. Somdee, a student in paramedic training, said:

I am going back home because in my village there are not enough doctors there ... I have to go help people in remote areas. (Somdee, male, age 22)

He said that this was his priority, even if he was offered a better job in Luang Prabang. These sentiments from Vong and Somdee are common in social capital networks, where members have both 'necessary and elective' (Bourdieu, 2007: 89) duties to invest in the social network. Therefore, while these decisions may appear to be voluntary choices, as Bourdieu suggests, reciprocity to the community of cultural capital as obtained

through academic qualifications may feel like an obligation to students and recent graduates. Moreover, this could be the experienced outcome for youths raised amidst a state-sponsored 'village solidarity' for the 'common good' discourse (High, 2006). These sentiments are particularly complex in the Lao context, where graduates may desire or feel obliged to have their career path benefit their home communities, but, may be unable to due to centrally managed job allocation. For example, Seng noted that he would like to live with his parents after graduating, but he would have to wait and see, because it could be difficult to find a job where they lived.

Beyond home communities, this motivation to pursue education to support one's community was also seen at the national scale with one participant. Keo, an upper secondary school student at the time of the interview, was asked what he dreamed of studying after high school. He replied:

I think after I graduate I would like to study to become a police ... Because I would like to look after my country. Our country is not peaceful yet. (Keo, male, age 22)

These data articulate Honeyman's (2010) discussion of social responsibility where students invest in the well-being of others and society as a whole, and Chea and Huijsmans's (2018) concept of becoming someone within your community. Through Bourdieu's capital theory, we can also see this social responsibility as a manifestation of social capital. Despite the barriers to getting into higher education programmes and securing jobs with a career paths, many participants mentioned their obligation or dream to benefit their communities with their education, whether at the household, village, or national level.

Support from friendship groups

It was also found that friendship groups played a central role in participants' experiences living and studying in Luang Prabang. Several participants spoke of living in shared accommodation and combining food and taking turns cooking:

I am living with my friends; we cook and eat together. (Janto, male age 19)

Similarly, Champa spoke of living in a dormitory in her first year in Luang Prabang:

We ate together. We shared whatever we had. It did not mean that every day you had to go eat together, it depended on if they were available to eat together they can, if not they can eat alone. But while I was living there, I liked to share with friends, talk to them, make new friends. (Champa, female, age 23)

While participants highlighted how difficult it can be to pursue education in the city without the kin and social networks from hometowns, Janto and Champa indicate how important it is to invest in new social capital in the city. Alternatively, Seng mentioned how much easier it was to move in with people he already knew from back home:

If I did not know them, I don't know if I could live with them. If you already know each other it is easy to become close friends. (Seng, male, age 20)

This implies how much stronger social capital is with networks from home, given the mutual understandings and investments in the network already made. Moreover, Seng also suggests that in the context of educational urbanisation, social capital and networks from home become even more critical for successfully living and studying in the city.

Data analysis revealed that sharing food and accommodation is highly significant, as food and accommodation were a financial struggle for many participants. Several participants mentioned that moving to Luang Prabang was the first time that they had to pay for food and accommodation, as they lived with family back home and could grow their food or find it in nature. This reciprocal assistance with their friendship groups, which we can interpret as mutual benefits from social capital, was often key to pursuing their education in Luang Prabang.

Beyond daily living routines, two participants also said they could rely on their friends to help them when they needed money. Seng's friends in Luang Prabang had helped him through health troubles:

Interviewer: While you are living in the city, who looks after you when you get sick?

Seng: Friends will look after me. They will come if I call them and I miss my parents.

Interviewer: Have you ever gone to the hospital alone?

Seng: Yes, I have. Then I call my friends and they ask their school if they can come.

While he had not had a health issue since moving to the town, Khamla also expected that his friends would look after him if needed:

They would look after me ... Like my brothers. (Khamla, male, age 21)

These perspectives are consistent with Bourdieu's theory of conversion between types of capital. While investing in social networks in the town, participants were aware of being able to convert social capital for economic capital in times of need.

These findings confirm the need for compatible friends and supportive living arrangements for basic needs and emotional well-being, which was also discovered in the Wilcox *et al.* (2005) and Maunder (2018) studies. The importance of community involvement for student learning and achievement (Masino and Niño-Zarazúa, 2016) is also critical in the Lao context.

Support from family members

All of the participants discussed their families and the extensive support offered by gifts of money and foodstuffs from family members, which helped the participants afford the cost of living in Luang Prabang. Ten of the participants specifically mentioned the support of their kin while living and studying in the city. This included parents, siblings and cousins. Some participants received money once at the beginning of the school year, while others received it more regularly, such as Janto who receives money from his parents every two weeks. Sai, the youngest of 10 children, stressed the importance of his siblings' financial success in enabling him to pursue his studies:

I am the youngest child. All of my siblings are rich, they have enough money already ... The only people who help me to study are my

siblings ... For example, this month I will call and ask from this brother and then next month I will call and ask from another brother. (Sai, male, age 22)

Therefore, having an extensive kinship network to draw upon increased Sai's social capital, as it increased the volume of economic capital that can be mobilised at any one time (Bourdieu, 2007). Several of the participants mentioned trying to become financially independent after moving to Luang Prabang. Continuing from above, Sai said,

I need a lot of money because letting my siblings help me forever is not right because they all have their families ... They just help me until some point when I can stand on my own two feet. (Sai, male, age 22)

Also working towards financial independence, Champa had set up a schedule with her parents. They paid for her living and tuition costs in her first year and second year of university, they paid for half in her third year and she paid for everything by herself in her fourth year. Her parents then helped her again in fifth year when her tuition increased and she needed more money:

Getting paid didn't mean that I could pay for everything 100% because when I was in fourth year and going into fifth year, honestly I asked money to pay for my tuition. (Champa, female, age 23)

This is consistent with Bourdieu's description of social capital, as actors do not draw on network relations unilaterally, but invest in them and contribute in return, as illustrated by reciprocity towards community members discussed above. However, financial support from family remained an important safety net for participants. While trying to financially support themselves, several participants mentioned the ability to rely upon their family members if necessary. Somvang shared:

If I really need help, I call my parents and then they will send me some money. When I go home they give me a little, but mostly I have to earn it by myself. (Somvang, male, age 19)

It was found that most participants also received food from home. This reduces food costs, reported by participants as one of the highest costs associated with living in the city. For example, Somvang spoke of extended family members who also live in Luang Prabang:

They cannot help me with money, but for food if I don't have any I can go get it from them and they will give it to me. (Somvang, male, age 19)

Six of the participants specifically mentioned receiving rice from their parents, a staple food item in the Lao diet. Further, several participants mentioned additional forms of family support that enabled their educational migration. Noi explained how her cousins helped her secure employment with the military and a full scholarship for tertiary education, while Sai mentioned the advice his brother has given him on how to study hard to achieve success. Multiple participants mentioned family members offering them accommodation while they pursued their education, either allowing them to live in their home or to share a dormitory room. Therefore, participants illustrated examples of family support across economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Overall, the value of this support in was articulated by Seng:

The thing I feel most proud about is that my parents sent me to study in the city and that they let me study what I want to study. (Seng, male, age 20)

For Champa, her parents could visit to help her through a hard time living alone in the city:

In that time I was sick and I was alone. There was nobody to look after me so they came. (Champa, female, age 23)

She also mentioned that the support of her parents motivated her to push through other difficult times:

I do stress and feel like I want to give up but I never give up. My parents sent me to study and I am too far, so I will not give up, only move forward. (Champa, female age 23)

These data demonstrate the critical importance of family support in learning, and shows that

Bourdieu's (2007) capital theory is useful to conceptualise educational urbanisation in Laos. Without family support, shared through cultural, social and economic capital, many students would struggle to complete their study programmes as the education system and the wider national economy is not currently offering support of this kind (Stuart-Fox, 2007, 2009; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013).

Discussion: The criticality of reciprocity between educational migrants and communities for social and cultural capital in Laos

Educational migrant students in Laos view the support of their friends, family and wider community as critically important to pursuing post-primary education, and in turn strive to reciprocate this support to their communities. The idea of hierarchical interdependence in Laos has been suggested in earlier research (Evans, 2001), and education is a medium through which this can manifest. Students who pursue higher education depend on those in their community, including relatives and wider community. These network groups support educational migrants with economic, social and cultural capital, and conversions between the types of capital. Based on this study, students attribute their ability to educationally urbanise to the support they have received. Lao families and community members continually help those who are pursuing educational goals by giving them accommodation, rice and foodstuffs, cash transfers and advice. [Correction added on 26 November 2019, after first online publication: the preceding sentence has been corrected.]

Meanwhile, students are simultaneously reciprocating to their community, either by sharing money, medicine or food; returning home every summer to help work the rice field or cooking and sharing food with friendship groups every night. The reciprocity observed between students and their community members are therefore not one-off exchanges or unidirectional forms of assistance, but a complex system of on-going, simultaneous reciprocity, indicative of hierarchical interdependence. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu's (2007) theory of social capital, where one both benefits from and contributes to social networks.

A future study could build upon these results by questioning the origins of the reciprocity between urbanised students and their communities, and how relatively effective this reciprocity is compared to urbanised students who are supported by other forms of capital. [Correction added on 26 November 2019, after first online publication: the preceding sentence has been corrected.] Perhaps the support structures in Laos are compensating for a lack of state support or the specific realities of poverty, geographic isolation or the effects of urbanisation. Further, these support structures may be compensating for the prejudice of socio-cultural hierarchies where rural youth are marginalised regardless of their educational achievements (Faming, 2019).

Students clearly have strong opinions of the contrasts between urban and rural settings. The above data set demonstrated that a common belief was that people in urban areas are more knowledgeable and developed, or possess more embodied cultural capital, and therefore moving to an urban setting would inherently create self-development. This presumed disparity between intellectual and cultural capital in rural and urban areas could profoundly affect educational migration. Participant perspectives therefore offer a more complex urban-rural polarization than has previously been captured in the literature (e.g. Phouxay *et al.*, 2010; Howe and Sims, 2011; Lao Social Indicator Survey, 2012). While previous research has identified motivations for urbanisation, such as seeking employment, education or higher standards of living (see Stuart-Fox, 2007; Phouxay *et al.*, 2010; Howe and Sims, 2011; Estudillo *et al.*, 2013), this study indicates the importance of first understanding the rationale behind these motivations. Moreover, the suggested superiority of Luang Prabang over participant hometowns may obscure the difficulties students face after urbanising. The data set revealed a plethora of challenges and struggles associated with living in Luang Prabang, particularly a lack of community, that students may not be aware of before moving there. In light of these findings, the significance of an absence of community cannot be overstated. This is not to assume familial or hometown 'solidarity' (High, 2006), but to highlight the very real challenges educational migrants face without support.

This research shows that educational attainment and outcomes are dependent upon relational

factors that intersect with the pursuit of education. These findings are supported by studies in other contexts (see Da Costa, 2007; Bhagavatheeswaran *et al.*, 2016; Morarji, 2016; Ryan *et al.*, 2017; Chea and Huijsmans, 2018; Ramanaik *et al.*, 2018; Wadhwa, 2018). In Laos, this was evidenced by some participants having the time and resources to develop social groups and an urban community, while others spent more time working and struggled with loneliness. These findings present further research opportunities; for example: How do gender, family, ethnic and community identities impact student experiences of educational migration? Are there patterns in these factorial differences between those who were able to urbanise to study and those who were not? And for comparative analysis, what are the experiential differences in pursuing further education for those born in Luang Prabang compared to those born in rural areas? Given the importance of community support for those who moved to Luang Prabang from rural settings, it is possible that pursuing further education in one's hometown could alter the relationship between student and community and the forms of capital that students draw upon.

Conclusions: Implications for policy and practice

The findings from this study demonstrate that educational development in Laos is contingent upon reciprocity: the reciprocity between student success and community support. This is critical to understand for educational development policy and implementation. Education is at the forefront of development strategy and planning. While increasing the number of schools or teachers may be a critical step to increasing post-primary enrolment rates in Laos, these strategies may only be effective when implemented in tandem with strategies aimed at the specific socio-cultural context. The community needs to be actively included in educational discourse and policy. This research indicates that fostering the relationship between students and their communities may be essential to advancing post-primary education. Furthermore, while a Bourdieusian framework adopts a theory of privilege (Morrow, 1999; Pinxten and Lievens, 2014), discussions about the future of education in Laos should not

overlook the experiences of youth without strong community ties, and without social and cultural capital, as they may be marginalised or further disadvantaged from pursuing higher education. (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). As community support has been identified as critical to educational success, the lack of community support could prevent the pursuit of higher education. Therefore, educational research and policy needs to identify whether a lack of community support can act as an obstacle to pursuing post-primary education, and if so how best to overcome this.

Laos remains one of the most under-researched countries, particularly in qualitative research. This paper has identified many themes and questions to address in further studies. Future research should consider additional lines of difference and marginalisation. For those who were not able to educationally migrate, what prevented their continuation of formal schooling? Answering this question must include both infrastructural and socio-cultural barriers. For example, how does reciprocity between educational success and community differ for male students compared to female students, or students of different ethnic backgrounds? Evans (2001) suggested that there is an 'ethnic hierarchy' in Laos, which includes lower educational attainment among ethnic minorities and greater barriers to urbanisation (Stuart-Fox, 2007, 2009; Howe and Sims, 2011). As there are differences in educational and urbanisation experiences between ethnic groups, it is possible that these differences also exist in educational migration. Therefore, further qualitative research is necessary to better understand how the experiences of urbanised students and their relationship with their communities differ along ethnic lines. As most Lao youth do not have access to higher education, we need to ensure that the most marginalised, those without cultural or social capital, and those without community support have equitable access to education.

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Notes

- 1 Post-primary education in the Laos context refers to lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary education.
- 2 The UNESCO Town of Luang Prabang includes 33 of the 58 village administration units that make up Luang Prabang City. In this article, we refer to the city as the entire city of Luang Prabang rather than the smaller UNESCO designated heritage site.

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APPENDIX

Guiding Interview Questions (*questions were asked in Lao*)

- How old are you?
- How far away is your hometown?
- Why did you move to the town?
- What level of school had you completed when you moved to the town?
- What level of school are you entering in September 2014?
- How have you sustained your living since moving to the town?
- What are the biggest challenges for a student studying in the town?
- What has been important in helping you study in the town?
- Do you have any family members in the town?
- What are the biggest expenses for a student in the town?
- What are your plans after graduating?