

Primary education in Vietnam: Extra classes and outcomes

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Extra classes are increasingly observed in both developed and developing countries. In Vietnam, a country where education reforms are at their height, extra classes are proliferating and have become a concern to society and the government. Although the government has banned extra classes that are independent of school administration, teachers often run home-based classes to supplement their income. This paper examines the extent and characteristics of extra classes among eight-year-old children, and examines the association between taking extra classes and learning outcomes (numeracy, reading, and writing skills).

Vietnam, primary education, extra class, learning outcomes

INTRODUCTION

The dominance of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and poverty reduction strategies (PRS) among donors and in developing countries has caused most discussion around primary education in international development to focus on enrolment rates. This means that attention has understandably focused on sub Saharan Africa where enrolment rates remain low and there is little chance that children in most countries in sub Saharan Africa, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015 (UNDP and UNICEF, 2002).

There is relative international complacency about countries where primary enrolment rates have been very high for some years. Vietnam is one such country. The primary enrolment rate rose from 87 per cent in 1993 to 91 per cent in 1998 and is probably currently around 92 per cent (UN Vietnam, 2003). However, the combination of a short school day and a short academic year mean that most primary students receive little more than half of the international normal annual teaching input (WB and ADB, 2002). This has led to a booming business of 'extra classes' (Chau, Ry, and Dam, 2000; Dan, 2000; EduNet Forum, 2004; Hanoi Department of Training and Education, 2000; HCMC Department of Training and Education, 2000; Minh, 2000). Extra classes occur even among the extremely poor and even though the government banned illegal extra classes and standardised the time quota for legal extra classes in 1993 (Government of Vietnam, 1993). Some extra classes are organised by the school's administration and are classified as legal. In contrast, teachers can create an artificial demand for extra classes by reducing the duration and learning content of their school classes and by running extra classes in their own homes, both of which are considered illegal (Dan, 2000).

The cost burden of extra classes emerged as a key issue in a recent qualitative, participatory poverty assessment among children in Vietnam (Harpham, Huong, Long, and Tuan, 2005). This study analyses how this situation arose, examines a sample of 1000 eight-year-olds across five provinces in Vietnam to consider the extent and burden of extra classes and assesses whether extra classes are associated with improved educational outcomes in the basic subjects.

METHODS

Sample

Respondents were 1,000 eight-year-old children¹ and their caregivers in the Young Lives survey (YL), conducted in 20 sentinel sites in five provinces (Lao Cai, Hung Yen, Da Nang, Phu Yen and Ben Tre) in Vietnam in 2002. These provinces spanned across the country – from North to South. They were randomly identified from a population of 4716 households that contained children aged eight years. The children were interviewed using structured questionnaires (see www.younglives.org.uk for full questionnaires and sampling details).

Measures

Extra study: This variable was measured through a number of indicators, including child attendance at extra classes (yes/no) after school, subjects of extra classes, identification of advisers who prompted children to take extra classes, number of hours attending classes in each subject per week, and total costs in Vietnam dong (VND) incurred during the previous year for overall education and extra classes.

Household poverty: The household wealth index (WI) was a score between 0 and 1 that was constructed as an average of three components: (1) *housing quality*, which was the simple average of rooms per person, and floor, roof and wall quality [household was scored 1 for each if it has finished material floor, sturdy roof, brick or plastered wall, and scored 0 if it does not have them]; (2) *consumer durables*, being the scaled sum of the nine consumer durable dummies [household was scored 1 for each if having any of the following nine durable items: radio, bicycle, TV, electric fan, motorbike, refrigerator, landline phone, mobile phone and car or truck; and scored 0 if not having any item]; and (3) *services* of drinking water, electricity, toilet and fuel, all of which were 0/1 variables. In this paper, three groups are used: the very poor ($WI < 0.25$), poor ($0.25 \leq WI < 0.5$), and non-poor ($WI \geq 0.5$).

Child learning outcomes: Reading, writing and numeracy were indicators. All 1,000 children were asked to read and write a simple sentence and multiply 2 by 4. The result is coded 0 ‘able to read’, ‘able to write’ if the child performed the task perfectly (*non-case*); and 1 ‘not able to read’, ‘not able to write’ if the child could not read/write at all or could read/write only one word or a phrase but not a full sentence (*case*). Similarly, 0 was given for correct multiplication and 1 for incorrect multiplication. Only one child did not give an answer due to shyness.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the survey commands in STATA 8 (StataCorp, 2003) with sentinel sites as strata, the primary sampling unit equivalent to the household, and sampling weight factor (pweight) denoting the inverse of the probability that an eligible child is included in the sample in each sentinel site. Therefore the estimates using weighted data in this paper can be generated for all 4,716 eligible children aged eight in the 20 sentinel sites. The Pearson chi-squared statistic corrected for the survey design is used for categorical data, and bivariate and multivariate analysis. The descriptive results present both percentages/figures for the study sample ($n = 1,000$) and estimates of percentages/figures for the population ($N = 4,716$).

To test the association between having extra classes and child learning outcomes, multivariate analysis was used. Factors from four main variables were put into the model to control for confounding factors: (1) community: region, (2) household: wealth status, father’s education, number of persons in the household, (3) mother: mother’s education, social capital level, and (4) child: ethnicity and mental health status. Gender was not entered into the analysis as the literature

¹ In Vietnam, 8-year-old children were in Grade 2 or 3, depending on when the survey was conducted.

review suggested that there is no significant difference for enrolment at primary between boys and girls in Vietnam. This study found no significant difference either.

DOES EXTRA CLASS PROLIFERATION OCCUR?

Prevalence of extra classes

Table 1 shows that, overall, 46 per cent (95% CI[0.45; 0.51]) of in-school children in the YL sites were currently taking extra classes. The prevalence increased from seven per cent in mountainous regions to 56 per cent in rural and 58 per cent in urban areas. This difference is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). A higher proportion of Kinh (majority Vietnamese) children went to extra classes than ethnic minority children ($p < 0.001$). This was consistent with ADB and World Bank research that concluded that wealthier and more urbanised students were far more likely to receive outside tutoring and additional courses (Bhushan, Bloom, Huu, and Thang, 2001).

Table 1. Prevalence of extra classes by region

Region	Prevalence of extra classes				
	Study sample (n=988)			Estimate of the Population (N=4716)	
	n	%	p-value	%	p-value
Mountainous (n ₁ = 239)	13	5.4		7	
Rural (n ₂ = 549)	300	54.6	<0.001	56	<0.001
Urban (n ₃ = 200)	123	61.5		58	
Total (n = 988)	436	44		46	
Ethnic minority (n ₁ = 117)*	3	2.6	<0.001	3.4	<0.001
Kinh (n ₂ = 871)	433	49.7		50	

* Of the three ethnic minority children, two were in mountainous Lao Cai and one in the rural Phu Yen site.

Types of subjects taken in extra classes

Of those who were taking extra classes, 90 per cent took only one kind of class, for example, either *mathematics and Vietnamese together* or *extra-curricular (so-called arts/sports) subjects* (such as dancing, swimming, singing, chess, and painting). The remaining 10 per cent took two types at the same time. Attending extra classes for mathematics and Vietnamese was the most common, accounting for 82 per cent in the study sample and 80 per cent, as an estimate for the population. One in every five children had extra classes in all the subjects taught in the curriculum at school. Only seven per cent of children taking extra classes went for extra-curricular subjects (see Table 2).

Advisers

When asked who suggested taking extra classes, caregivers (mainly mothers) reported that parents and other close relatives were most likely to have prompted children (over 60 per cent for all types of extra classes). Teachers both in and outside of the schools where the children studied were the second most common source of encouragement. Fewer than 10 per cent of children attending extra classes for all school subjects and mathematics or literature perceived a need for the extra classes themselves, but 17 per cent of children taking extra classes in arts or sport subjects *had* suggested this option themselves. The estimate for the population is 21 per cent (see Table 3).

Time spent in extra classes

Table 4 shows the average hours children spent in extra classes per week. This time varied slightly across regions, from 7.9 hours in mountainous areas to 8.9 hours in rural and 9.7 hours in urban areas, although this difference is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The estimates of the population present similar means (7.8 in mountainous, 8.9 in rural and 9.5 in urban). Of the 13 children taking extra classes in the mountainous sites, only 2 were from an ethnic minority. Therefore almost all the children taking extra classes were Kinh people whose living habits and

education values did not vary much across regions. This might explain why the mean number of hours of extra classes did not vary significantly across regions. According to government regulations, students in primary education were not allowed to take more than two extra classes, equivalent to four hours, per week. In this study, 90 per cent of children who took extra classes attended for more than the stipulated hours; 58 per cent of these attended for more than eight hours a week, twice the legal duration (Table 5).

Table 2. Distribution of type of extra classes by region

	TOTAL		REGION (n=436)						p-value
	n	%	Mountainous		Rural		Urban		
			n	%	n	%	n	%	
Type of extra classes taken									
All school subjects	85	20	1	8	54	18	30	24	>0.05
Mathematics & Vietnamese	356	82	11	85	256	85	89	72	<0.05
Extra-curricular subjects	29	7	0	0	9	3	20	16	<0.001
Other subjects	11	3	1	8	9	3	1	1	>0.05
No. of extra classes taken									
One type	391	90	13	100	272	91	106	86	>0.05
Two types*	45	10	0	0	28	9	17	14	
ESTIMATE RATE OF POPULATION (N=4716)									
Type of extra classes taken									
All school subjects		20		8		19		23	>0.05
Mathematics and Vietnamese		80		85		84		73	>0.05
Extra-curricular subjects		7		0		4		12	<0.001
Other subjects		3		7		3		1	>0.05
No. of extra classes taken									
One type		90		100		90		90	>0.05
Two types**		10		0		10		10	

* No child took more than two types of extra classes.

** Taking two types of subjects at the same time meant that children had extra-curricular classes plus either all school subjects or mathematics and Vietnamese.

Table 3. Persons who prompted children to take extra classes

Type of extra class taken	ADVISERS (n = 436)							
	Parents		Teachers		Children		Other	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
All school subjects (n ₁ = 85)	56	66	21	25	8	9	0	0
Mathematics and Vietnamese (n ₂ = 356)	229	64	96	27	29	8	2	1
Arts subjects (n ₃ = 29)	19	66	5	17	5	17	0	0
ESTIMATED RATE OF THE POPULATION (N=4719)								
All school subjects		69		24		7		0
Mathematics and Vietnamese		64		27		9		1
Arts subjects		62		18		21		0

Expenditure

Table 6 shows the difference in costs that parents incurred for children's education across regions. Parents in urban areas spent around three to four times more than those in rural and mountainous areas respectively (p<0.001). The total education cost included basic school fees,² uniform, textbooks, notebooks, other school supplies and extra classes.

According to the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey 2002, costs amount to an average of VND270000 per year for a child in primary school and around 25 per cent of this amount was for extra classes (World Bank, 2003). In this study the average estimate for the population was VND376800 and 30.7 per cent of this was for extra classes. This difference might be explained by

² Government policy was that there were no school fees, but at the beginning of the school year parents were informed about 'fees', which were described as 'voluntary contributions to the school'. Therefore, socially they were considered a kind of 'school fee'.

the fact that the YL study was designed as a sentinel site study and the sample was therefore not nationally representative and might exclude extremely poor unregistered children or those living in very remote areas (who tended to pay less for education costs).

Table 4. Mean hours in extra classes per week for children taking extra classes, by region

Region	Mean hours children spent in extra classes per week			
	n	Mean	Std. Err.	95%CI
STUDY SAMPLE^a (n=436)				
Mountainous	13	7.9	N/A	4.5; 11.3
Rural	300	8.9	N/A	8.5; 9.3
Urban	123	9.7	N/A	9.0; 10.4
Total	436	9.1	N/A	8.7; 9.5
ESTIMATE OF THE POPULATION^a (N=4716)				
Mountainous		7.8	1.6	4.6; 11
Rural		8.9	0.2	8.5; 9.4
Urban		9.5	0.4	8.7; 10.3
Total		9.1	0.2	8.7; 9.5

^a No significant difference ($p > 0.05$)

Table 5. Distribution of time in extra classes among children taking extra classes

Hours in extra classes per week	REGION (n=436)							
	TOTAL*		Mountainous n ₁ = 13		Rural n ₂ = 300		Urban n ₃ = 123	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<=4 hours	43	10	6	46	33	11	4	3
>4-8 hours	139	32	2	15	97	32	40	33
> 8 hours	254	58	5	38	170	57	79	64
ESTIMATE OF POPULATION^a (N=4716)								
<= 4 hours		10		46		11		4
>4-8 hours		32		15		32		34
> 8 hours		58		38		57		62

^a p-value < 0.001

Table 6. Cost of extra classes (in thousands of VND) by region in 2002 among children taking extra classes

Region	Cost of extra classes (A)	Overall cost of education (B)	% (Mean A/Mean B when child taking extra class)
	Mean (VND)	Mean (VND)	
Mountainous	98.8	169.5	29%
Rural	60.0	235.2	23%
Urban	500.7	877.0	47%
Total	185.5	349.2	30%
ESTIMATE OF THE POPULATION (N=4716)			
	Mean (VND) 95%CI	Mean (VND) 95%CI	Weighted % 95%CI
Mountainous	96.6 [33.7; 159.4]	180.6 [165.7; 195.4]	29% [20; 40]
Rural	60.2 [53.2; 67.1]	236.7 [224.3; 249.2]	23% [21; 25]
Urban	425.5 [369.5; 481.5]	780 [711.6; 849.1]	44% [41; 47]
Total	191.7 [171.1; 212.2]	376.8 [356.3; 397.3]	31% [29; 32]

The Young Lives study found that the cost for extra classes incurred by parents in urban areas was around VND425000 per year. This amount was four to seven times higher than in rural and mountainous areas. As a proportion of total education costs incurred by parents, extra classes constituted 44 per cent in urban areas, while in mountainous and rural areas the proportion was around one-quarter (23-29 per cent) ($p < 0.001$).

Were extra classes associated with good learning outcomes?

Overall most children could read, write and multiply correctly: 89 per cent, 75 per cent and 86 per cent respectively (see Table 7). When confounding factors (region, household wealth, father's education, mother's education, household size, child ethnicity and child mental health as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)) were kept constant, having extra classes was not significantly associated with eight-year-old children's writing and numeracy

(shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3). However, children taking extra classes after school were more than twice as likely to be able to read correctly than children who did not have extra classes (OR=2.2; $p<0.05$).

Table 7. Literacy and numeracy of eight-year-olds

Learning outcome index	Total	%
Reading*		
Cannot read anything	43	4
Can read letters only	34	3
Can read words only	45	5
Can read sentence	872	88
Writing		
Cannot write sentence**	82	8
Wrote with difficulty or errors	170	17
Wrote without difficulty or errors	741	75
Numeracy***		
Multiply incorrect	107	14
Multiply correct	663	86

* Sentence = It is hot in summer; ** Sentence = I like dogs; *** $2 \times 4 = ?$

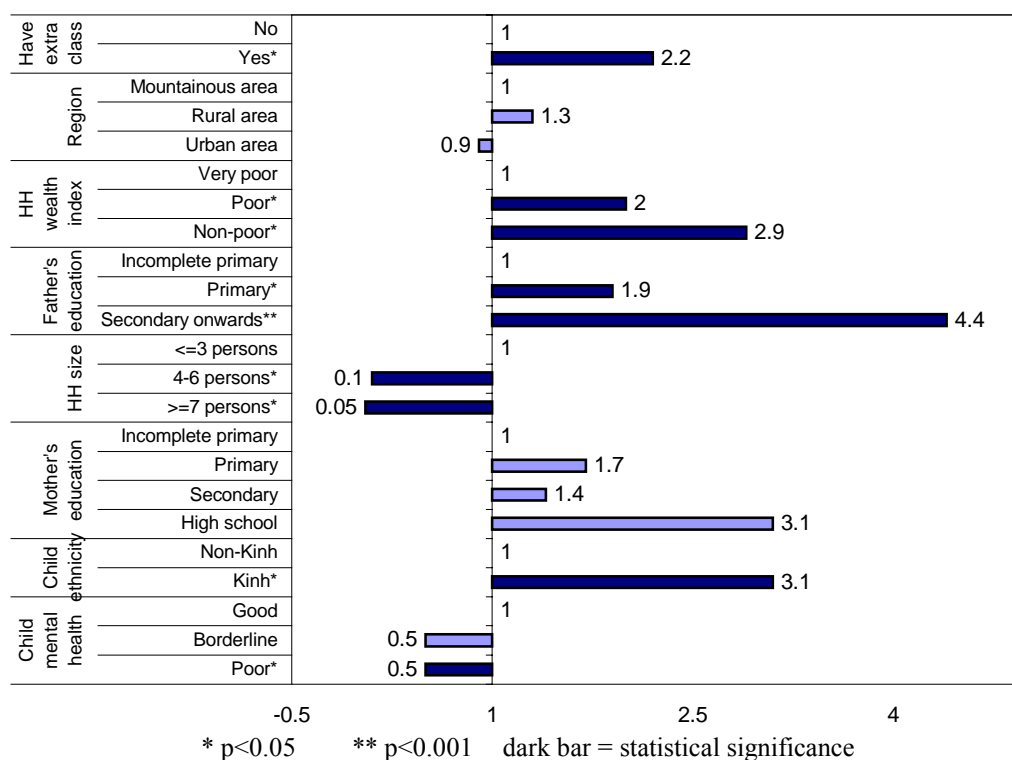


Figure 1. Logistic regression estimates of predictors of correct reading

So, if extra classes were not generally associated with learning outcomes, what was? Child mental health status was significantly associated with all three learning outcomes. Children with poor mental health were 42-58 per cent less likely to perform literacy and numeracy tasks correctly ($p<0.05$). Household wealth had a significant impact on reading and numeracy skills, with children from wealthier families more likely to read and multiply correctly. Household size is also significantly associated with learning outcomes, as the more people there are in the household the lower the chance the child can read or write correctly. However, this effect was very slight.

Other factors, such as parental education, ethnicity and region were found to have significant effects on a single outcome only. Children whose fathers completed primary and secondary school were almost twice and four times respectively more likely to read correctly. They were almost three times more likely to write correctly if their father had completed secondary school

($p < 0.001$). No significant association between father's education and child numeracy was found. Children whose mothers had completed primary school were nearly twice as likely to read correctly although statistical significance was not found. No significance was found for writing or numeracy. Kinh children were three times more likely to read correctly than non-Kinh children, which might be explained by the fact that reading materials in school were in Kinh and not their mother tongue. They therefore had to make more effort to learn to read than those learning in their mother tongue. No significant difference was found regarding writing or multiplication. Regarding region, children living in urban areas were twice as likely to be able to multiply correctly than children living in mountainous and rural areas ($p < 0.05$). The study did not find a significant effect between region and child reading and writing abilities when other factors were controlled.

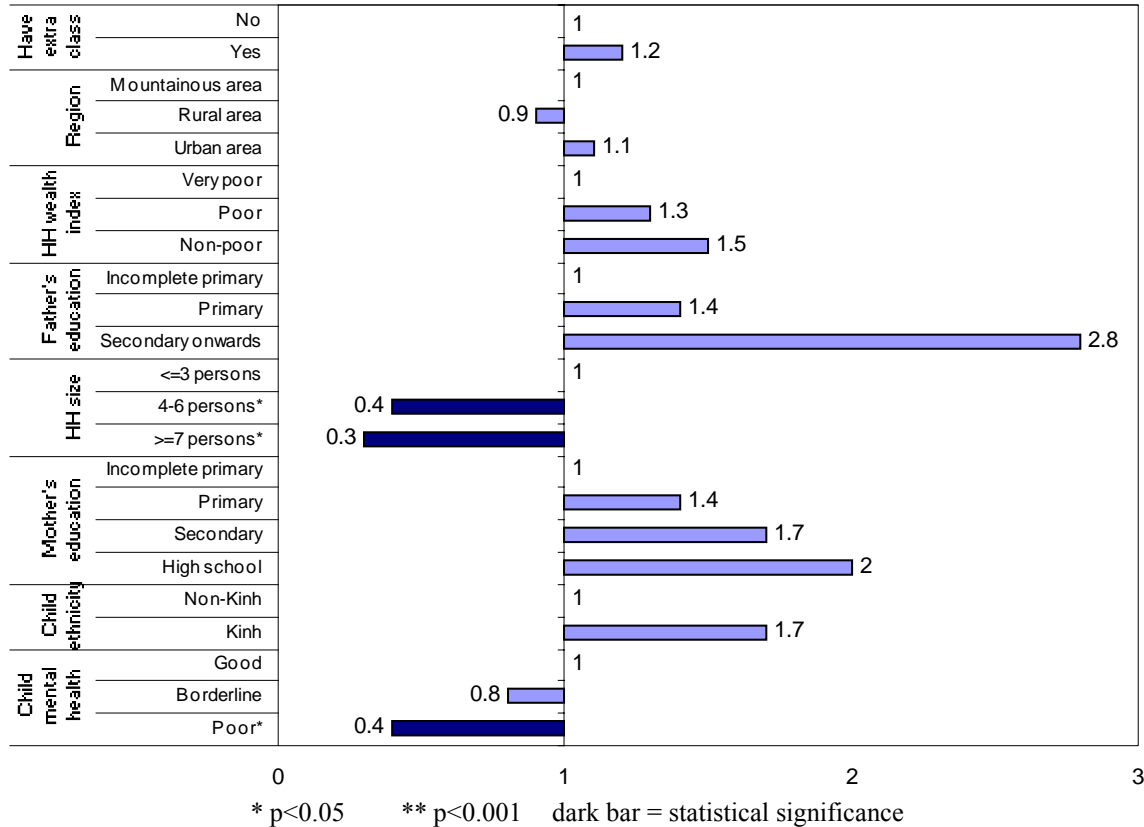


Figure 2. Logistic regression estimates of predictors of correct writing

DISCUSSION

Although the government launched *Decree No. 242-TTg* in 1993 banning the proliferation of extra class provision, and circulars (Government of Vietnam, 1993) providing guidance on the control of extra classes, such high prevalence (46 per cent) of children taking extra classes after school is very serious. However, a limitation of this study is that we did not ascertain whether children were taking extra classes in order to catch up with their peers and because they were exceptionally talented students, or for one or more of the illegal reasons considered in the introduction. Thus, we cannot identify the true rate of illegal classes occurring in this sample. Nevertheless, the high prevalence of extra classes might reflect the fact that full-day schooling had not yet been widely implemented in Vietnam, and society in general, and parents in particular, were spontaneously adjusting to overcome the weaknesses of the current primary education system.

So what are the weaknesses of the system? A transparent, standardised system of pupil assessment based on age and appropriate goals has not yet been developed. Therefore the situation has created what might be regarded as 'false' educational needs, whereby children have to take extra classes

in order to attain the same level as classmates of the same age, under pressure from teachers and parents. Nevertheless, extra classes were not found to have a significant association with child learning outcomes in writing and numeracy. The improvement in reading rates associated with extra classes arguably did not compensate for the associated pressure on the child, the lack of time for recreation, and the lack of time for self-education.

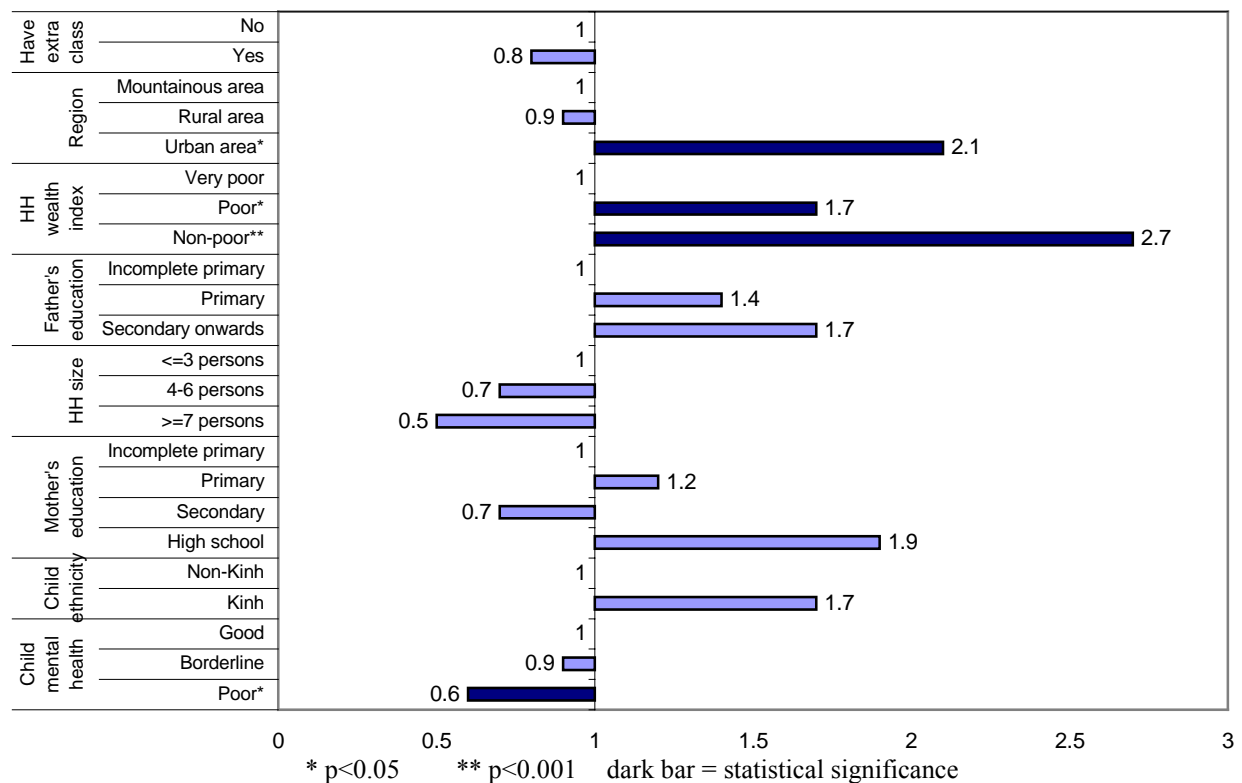


Figure 3. Logistic regression estimate of predictors of correct numeracy

To eliminate extra classes, first, social perceptions of extra classes and their effectiveness need changing. It is necessary to help parents understand and engage with the government’s education policy, understand Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) requirements and the true value of extra classes. In order to do that, there should be more independent research results conveyed to the public via various channels. It is also vital to do research in which children’s voices about whether extra classes do or do not help children learn better should be gathered and disseminated to the public. Second, the government in general and the education sector in particular could perhaps focus on full-day schooling implementation for primary children and a promulgation of a transparent, standardised system of pupil assessment based on age and textbook. In addition, the MoET and the government need to manage teaching in both public and private schools, establishing high cash penalties or dismissing from the education sector anyone who insists on providing illegal extra classes for cash generation. While it is debated whether teachers continue provision of extra classes at home due to low salaries, it is worthwhile to review and develop an appropriate teachers’ salary and incentive scheme in order to ensure that teachers receive an adequate income from legal academic classes.

This study suggests that extra classes may be necessary for ‘catch-up’ children but should not be the norm for a generation of primary children. This will reduce costs and pressure, not only on children but also on their parents. Once the artificial extra classes are controlled, extra classes might truly help vulnerable and slow children to catch up with their peers and pass grades. The broader finding that poor children suffer poorer learning outcomes calls for more equity in both the provision and the quality of primary level education.

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