LAO PDR: POLICY INSIGHTS FROM A MULTI-YEAR TEACHING AND LEARNING STUDY SERIES

Education Analytics Services, August 2021
Debbie Wong & Hilary Hollingsworth

The Australian Government is supporting significant education reforms in Lao PDR. This policy note summarises baseline findings on primary school teacher practice and student learning outcomes, at a point just prior to major curriculum changes. Key findings include the need for intensive action on Lao language literacy, targeted teacher training on the new curriculum with a special emphasis on second language learners, and deepened engagement with school communities to reduce student absenteeism and improve student readiness for school. Part of a multi-year study series, the Education Analytics Service is investigating how the Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos program (BEQUAL) is making a difference to the Government of Laos' ongoing primary education reforms. The study series was commissioned by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to investigate teacher and learning development initiatives in three countries: Lao PDR, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu.

The Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos program (BEQUAL)

BEQUAL was developed in partnership between DFAT and the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). BEQUAL aims to improve teaching practices and related governance systems, with the ultimate goal to improve learning outcomes for primary school-age children. A key purpose of the BEQUAL program is to support MoES in the development and implementation of a new primary education curriculum. The core components are:

New primary education curriculum

From 2019, the Lao government began implementation of a new primary curriculum, starting from Grade 1. Teachers are expected to teach Lao language and other subjects using the new curriculum, supported by teacher guides and other teaching and learning resources. The new curriculum is comparatively more prescriptive and promotes inclusive teaching practices, student-centred and active learning, enables localised curriculum, and includes ongoing (formative) assessment tools.

In-service teacher professional development program and grant support

BEQUAL's in-service teacher professional development program includes two packages. At the national level, support grants and training are provided to assist provincial authorities in the delivery of face-to-face teacher orientation on the new curriculum materials. In BEQUAL's 32 target districts, additional in-service support is provided to teachers and principals. This includes strengthening communities of practice, promoting teacher use of self-access learning resources and tools, supporting schools to implement the new curriculum, and providing district level support grants.[1]

[1] Examples of activities include: peer-to-peer support, networking, pedagogical adviser monitoring visits, and teacher cluster meetings to discuss specific issues.

[2] Study duration has been impacted by COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Study Design

The Education Analytics Service has been commissioned to undertake an independent, multi-year study to investigate how the BEQUAL program supports improvements in teaching approaches and student literacy in Lao PDR, by exploring two research questions:

1. To what extent and how does teaching quality change following BEQUAL-supported in-service program?

2. To what extent and how do students' literacy outcomes change following the new curriculum implementation?

This study adopts a mixed methods approach utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods. It is designed to follow teachers and principals as the Lao primary curriculum is progressively rolled out over four years.

The pre-intervention (baseline) study reported here was conducted prior to the roll-out of the new curriculum – this allows for insights into teaching practices and student learning at a time just prior to a period of major education reforms. Quantitative data was collected via questionnaires administered in 355 schools to 348 principals and 347 Grade 1 teachers. A Lao language literacy test was administered to more than 2,200 Grade 1 students. Qualitative data was collected across 12 case study schools, comprising of interviews and classroom observations of Lao language lessons.

Quantitative	Survey data from teachers and principals (2019 and 2021). Student learning assessment data (2019 and 2021).
Qualitative	12 school case studies – purposively selected by province for the duration of the study (longitudinal). Interviews with education stakeholders, classroom observations (2019, 2021 and 2022).
Intended Study Duration[2]	4 years
Reporting	Pre-intervention/Baseline Report (summarised here): Midline Report Endline Report EAS Study Series Final Report

Table 1: Overview of data collection methods, tools, intended study duration and reporting

Key Findings

The baseline study focused on conditions in Lao schools prior to the roll-out of the new curriculum. The findings should be instructive in identifying key areas for priority action and investment as the curriculum, teaching and assessment reforms flow through Lao's primary education system.

LAO LANGUAGE

Results of the Grade 1 assessment developed for this study showed concerning levels of Lao language literacy.

- Just three per cent of students were considered proficient and meeting Grade 1 curriculum expectations for Lao language.

- Nearly 60 per cent of students demonstrated limited, very limited or no Lao language literacy skills at all.

- Teachers ranked Grade 1 students' low Lao language skills as the greatest challenge for making progress in learning.

The language of instruction presented an obstacle for teaching and learning, for both native and non-native speakers.

- Students who spoke Lao-Tai (the language of instruction) at home, demonstrated slightly stronger test performance, than students who spoke other languages.

- The majority of teachers whose native language was other than Lao, used a mother tongue language while teaching Lao on some occasions.

A lack of training on Lao language teaching methods was highlighted as a key issue.

- The majority of teachers indicated they found aspects of teaching Lao language difficult.

- Teachers reported and were observed using a limited set of pedagogical practices and resources for teaching Lao language.

- Teachers reported using a range of strategies to provide extra support to students. However, the data shows that more knowledge is needed on identifying and supporting students with learning difficulties.

- More than half the teachers surveyed indicated that additional training on teaching Lao language to non-Lao speakers is needed.

STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

Student absenteeism was extensive at the time of data collection. Student absenteeism was identified by teachers as a key challenge to Lao language learning. Higher levels of student absenteeism were associated with poorer student test performance.

High student absenteeism presents a number of risks for teachers' ability to support students' learning.

- Study respondents reported that student absenteeism was often due to children accompanying their parents to work in the field or to look for food in the forest. As such, teachers' ability to teach the required curriculum content is compromised, as are student learning outcomes.

- Student absenteeism could also be related to the level of community support and engagement to students' individual learning. Greater presence of communities in students' learning process could provide a supportive environment for students to thrive.

Recommendations
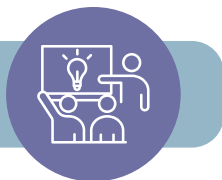
LAO LANGUAGE

The low levels of Lao language literacy, for both native and non-native speakers, requires targeted teaching and learning resources, embedded in the new curriculum.

Tied to the new curriculum, a tailored policy and implementation approach is needed to address the low levels of Lao language literacy. This includes the need for explicit teaching and learning tools and practices.

- Teachers need to be supported to utilise and engage with the full range of teaching and learning resources provided with the new curriculum.

- Ongoing professional learning and resources for teachers to extend their knowledge and application of effective Lao language teaching strategies.

- As part of the curriculum and learning reforms, make clear decisions on the local, provincial and national actors that will deliver support for teachers, principals and communities, with clear accountability structures.

Access to Lao language resources was prioritised by teachers and principals as important for improving Lao language teaching.

An important policy consideration, then, is establishing effective and efficient teaching and learning resource distribution through existing, cost-effective mechanisms. For example, **principal-led support** at the school level can be integrated within the wider education system to support Lao language teaching in areas such as material preparation, lesson planning, pronunciation and teaching methods. Preliminary findings suggest that principals can lead teaching and learning in their schools when equipped with the resources to do so. This could be supplemented by teacher working groups and peer collaboration, which already exist in some schools.

Teachers' access to in-service training is an important factor in effective teaching and learning. One of the risks to the curriculum rollout is not fully utilising the potential of **pedagogical advisers**. Pedagogical advisers, along with provincial and district officers, could establish communities of practice through teacher working groups, peer-to-peer support and school networking.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Strengthen community support to foster a rich learning environment for students.

- Set up mechanisms to enable school communities to support Lao language learning

A government-run campaign – perhaps through a local community centre or the school – could encourage parents and communities to support and actively develop Lao language skills in children from an early age. This would have the added benefit of emphasising the important role families and communities play in supporting children's preparation for school and ongoing support for their learning at every level.

Parents' limited education levels may pose a challenge to community support for students. One possible way to address this is to have teachers conduct parent-teacher interviews, to share information with parents on students' progress, highlight the importance of early learning and to provide resources and tips for supporting learning at home.

Teachers in the study reported that their conversations with parents have mostly focused on student attendance rather than prioritising Lao language learning or other learning concerns. The development of a set of talking points or discussion framework would be beneficial, outlining a set of key priorities for teachers to address when they speak with parents. This would help teachers organise information sharing with parents as well as achieve consistent messaging across the country.

Cassity, E., Chainey, J. Hollingsworth, H., Pereira, T., Sarmento, D. & Wong, D. (2019). 'Teacher professional learning in Timor-Leste, Lao PDR and Vanuatu: Inclusive programs that support education system actors'. *Panel presented at UKFIET, The Education and Development Forum*. Oxford: United Kingdom.

Education Analytics Service. (2019). *Teacher Development Evaluation Conceptual Framework.* Melbourne: Australian Council of Educational Research.

Education Analytics Service. (2020). *Teacher Development Multi-Year Study Series: Evaluation of Australia's Investment in Teacher Development in Lao PDR – Baseline Report*. Melbourne: Australian Council of Educational Research.

Education Analytics Service. (2020). *Teacher Development Multi-Year Study Series: Insights on the challenges of limited data availability for measuring and reporting student learning outcomes.* Melbourne: Australian Council of Educational Research.

Office of Development Effectiveness. (2015). *Investing in Teachers.* Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Debbie Wong is a Senior Research Fellow in the Educational Monitoring and Research Division at the Australian Council for Educational Research. Debbie is the Project Manager for the DFAT teacher development study series, and co-leads the Laos Study component together with Hilary Hollingsworth.

Hilary Hollingsworth is a Principal Research Fellow in the Educational Monitoring and Research Division at the Australian Council for Educational Research. Hilary is the Principal Technical Advisor for the DFAT teacher development study series, and co-leads the Laos Study component together with Debbie Wong.

Recommended APA citation:

Wong, D. & Hollingsworth, H. (2021). Lao PDR policy insights from a multi-year teaching and learning study series. Australian Council for Educational Research. https://research.acer.edu.au/eas