STRENGTHENING BASIC EDUCATION PROJECT
A STUDY OF MULTI-GRADE TEACHING PRACTICES
WITHIN TWO DISTRICTS OF BOKEO PROVINCE

BOKEO PROVINCE, PEOPLE’S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF LAOS
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## Terms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEP</td>
<td>Basic Education Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete School</td>
<td>All Grades 1-5 present in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DESB</td>
<td>District Education and Sports Bureau</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>Early Childhood and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESDF</td>
<td>Education Sector Development Framework</td>
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<td>ESDP</td>
<td>Education Sector Development Plan</td>
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<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education For All</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTI</td>
<td>Fast Track Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>International Non Government Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoES</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Sports</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGT</td>
<td>Multi-grade Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NER</td>
<td>Net Enrolment Rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Government Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGPES</td>
<td>National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Pedagogical Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PESS</td>
<td>Provincial Education and Sports Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCI</td>
<td>Save the Children International</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOQ</td>
<td>Schools of Quality</td>
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<td>TOR</td>
<td>Terms of Reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children's Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>VEDC</td>
<td>Village Education Development Committee</td>
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction: Multi-grade teaching is found in most countries in the world, and in the Lao PDR, it is estimated that 26% of children attending primary school are studying in multi-grade classes, with the majority of these schools found in more remote, poorer areas.

This study focuses on the situation with regard to multi-grade teaching in two districts in Bokeo Province in the northwest of the Lao PDR where Plan International, through their Lao Government partners, has funded six training workshops for 186 teachers from 124 schools in multi-grade teaching in 2012. One of the main purposes of this study was to review the training that has been provided, and its impact in terms of teaching and learning in the classroom, in order to enhance both the quality of training as well as multi-grade teaching and learning in the future.

Multi-Grade Teaching - An Overview: While multi-grade teaching exists in some form in most countries around the world (globally, it is estimated that 30% of primary school students are in multi-grade classes), in the Lao PDR, it is estimated that 26% of primary students are in such classes.

Multi-grade classes can include different approaches to teaching. For example, they may involve a single teacher teaching two or more classes separately but at the same time. On the other hand, the approach may involve a teacher making a programme for the combined grades, in one space, with a mix of grade-specific and grade-combined activities. There are also a range of approaches which fall in between these two different ways of teaching multi-grade classes - for example, a teacher teaching two or more grades separately most of the time, but including some activities, typically related to handicrafts or music, where they occasionally combine grades.

Purpose, Scope and Methodology of the Study: The overall purpose of the study of multi-grade teaching in Bokeo Province was to assess the effectiveness of the initiatives supported by Plan International in 2012 aimed at improving the quality of multi-grade teaching in target schools, both in terms of process (i.e. in-service teacher training) as well as to assess impact - changes that might have taken place in the classroom as a direct result of this training. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inform not only future support for improving multi-grade teaching and learning in Plan International target areas, but also perhaps support provided in other provinces in the Lao PDR.

In line with the Terms of Reference (refer to Appendix 1), the study interviewed those involved in preparing and delivering multi-grade teaching training, those who received the training, as well as those responsible for supporting and monitoring teachers in their classrooms. In addition, secondary data was gathered from a range of sources, including other countries, MoES, PESS and DESB. Classroom observation of multi-grade classes was also conducted, and statistical data gathered from the 12 sample schools visited in the two target districts, Meung and Pak Tha.

In addition, multi-grade teaching in three other countries - Vietnam, India and Columbia - and previous initiatives in the Lao PDR, particularly the Teacher Upgrading Programme (TUP) and the Lao Australia Basic Education Programme (LABEP), were examined for possible lessons which might inform future development of multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR.

The study gathered a range of both qualitative and quantitative information using several different methods and different instruments and was implemented by a team comprised of an external consultant, and staff from Plan International, Bokeo PESS, and three staff each from Meung and Pak Tha.
DESBs. Interviews were also carried out by the consultant with the Deputy Director General of the Department of Primary Education, Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), as well as relevant staff from Save the Children International (SCI), and UNICEF.

**Multi-Grade Teaching and Policy:** At the policy level, multi-grade teaching is mentioned in the Education Sector Development Framework/Plan (ESDP) as a means to reduce the number of incomplete schools as well as being included as a topic in the Schools of Quality training manual. While the *Education Strategic Vision by 2010 and 2020* makes reference to strengthening multi-grade teaching, it is not mentioned in the *Reform Strategy*, which emphasises the need to improve teacher capacity and teaching methodologies. The *EFA Mid-Decade Assessment* refers to multi-grade schools, but it is more in the context of enabling incomplete schools to become complete schools. *The Education Development Framework/Plan (2009 - 2015)* states the need to further develop multi-grade teaching, particularly through ensuring the more effective deployment and use of teachers including expanded multi-grade teaching.

**Previous Initiatives:** These include the UNICEF supported Teacher Upgrading Programme (TUP), the Lao Australian Basic Education Program (LABEP), and the Schools of Quality (SoQ) Programme currently being implemented, including in schools in target districts in Bokeo Province.

**TUP:** From 1991 to 2001, the Lao Government and UNICEF, with support from other donors and NGOs, began the Teacher Upgrading Programme aimed at upgrading the skills of untrained and unqualified teachers, particularly in provinces with poor education indicators and a large percentage of ethnic groups. There was a particular focus on working through school clusters (including the establishment of cluster resource centres) and on training teachers for multi-grade classroom teaching.

With regard to multi-grade teaching, an evaluation of the TUP Programme in 2000 found that grades were largely being taught separately, usually in the same classroom, with only one grade being taught at a time while other students waited for the teacher to come and teach their grade. The report highlighted the fact that the training provided in multi-grade teaching was too short, that there needed to be more time spent on teaching strategies and classroom management techniques for multi-grade classrooms and that there was a need for more follow-up support from the trainers to assist the teachers after they returned to the classroom. As the findings from this study will later show, many of the findings and recommendations from that evaluation still remain valid today, 12 years later.

**LABEP:** The Lao-Australia Basic Education Programme (LABEP), an AusAID-funded Programme with funding support from ADB, ran from 1999 to 2008, trained over 4000 teachers in multi-grade teaching and the use of teaching and learning materials produced by the Programme. Practical educational models were adopted, including multi-grade teaching, as well as teacher training targeting young women from ethnic communities and remote villages. Multi-grade teaching modules were also developed for teacher trainees in pre-service teacher training institutes.

**SoQ:** Known globally as the Child Friendly School model, this ‘whole school’ approach to school development has been supported by UNICEF and other Development Partners in many countries around the world. First piloted in the Lao PDR in 2006, it underwent a name change to Schools of Quality and the model has now been mainstreamed by the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports and has been included in the ESDP as the most appropriate model for primary education development. It is currently being implemented nationwide, including in Plan International’s target districts in Bokeo.
Province. A review of the teacher training manual for SoQ found that there is only one activity (2 pages) related to multi-grade teaching (i.e. Activity 4) which is part of the training 'package' currently being delivered to teachers, school principals and others. While this provides an introduction to multi-grade teaching, it does not provide teachers with the more in-depth knowledge and skills that are required to teach multi-grade classes effectively.

A multi-grade teacher training module was produced by MoES in 2007 (refer to Appendix 4), possibly drawing from the earlier TUP and/or LABEP materials, and this is the core module currently being used to train teachers in addition to the SoQ materials. However, while covering the main aspects of multi-grade teaching in detail, it does not provide much in the way of practical activities to help teachers understand how to teach multi-grade classes more effectively.

Case Studies - Vietnam, India and Columbia: Three case studies are examined later in this report (see 5.3 Multi-Grade Teaching in Other Countries) and each country situation is outlined in more detail in that section of the report. The situation in all three countries shares some similarities in terms of educational contexts (in terms of limited resources, insufficient teachers, small and remote schools, etc.) and in terms of multi-grade education, these countries also share some common features with multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR. These include:

- The majority of primary schools in rural areas have multi-grade classes.
- Many of these schools are in poorer or more remote communities.
- Schools lack both teaching and learning resources as well as adequate infrastructure.
- While Ministries of Education have given some attention to addressing the needs of multi-grade classes and schools, the dominant paradigm is mono-grade instruction, except for Colombia and the RIVER model in India.
- A specific curriculum for multi-grade that is locally relevant but based on the national curriculum has contributed to more effective multi-grade teaching.
- Teachers require specific training on multi-grade techniques and on how to use the student and teacher guides that are necessary for effective implementation of multi-grade teaching.
- One off trainings are insufficient for effective multi-grade teaching; it must be supplemented by longer term support from education officials, as well as regular training.

Both the earlier initiatives to develop the quality of multi-grade teaching specifically the TUP and LABEP - as well as the three country case studies outlined above, have implications for future support to improve multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR, and more specifically, for Plan International's support for basic education in Bokeo. Lessons learned, as well as resource materials produced earlier, can help inform future efforts to enhance multi-grade teacher training and teaching.

Multi-Grade Teaching Study - Findings in Meung and Pak Tha Districts, Bokeo Province:
The study focussed on Plan International's target districts - Meung and Pak Tha - regarding in-service training in multi-grade teaching conducted in 2012, as well as multi-grade teaching practices and what changes might have occurred in the classroom as a result of this training. As well as interviews with key stakeholders at province and district levels, a field visit was made to a sample of 12 schools, six per target district.
While detailed findings per District can be found later in this report, overall findings included:

- **Training in multi-grade teaching was constrained by a lack of handouts or a teachers’ guide, limited time and limited experience in multi-grade teaching on the part of the trainers:** While the training supported by Plan in 2012 appears to have provided a useful introduction to teaching multi-grade classes, it is clear from both the responses of the teachers who participated, as well as from the trainers themselves, that the quality of the training needs to be improved. The trainers themselves need more training in how to effectively train multi-grade teachers, particularly as most of them have not received any training in this themselves. More time needs to be allocated for practice teaching, and trainers need to demonstrate multi-grade teaching techniques rather than only explaining them. Training would also benefit from the provision of more reference materials in the form of a resource manual or handouts for teachers.

- **Follow-up and support for multi-grade teachers after training was not done systematically:** While all teachers reported being visited by a pedagogical advisor (PA) at least twice in the past year, this does not seem to have been clearly linked to the training. For example, no follow up plan was made with teachers during the multi-grade training, and no observation form specifically for multi-grade classes was developed or used. While several teachers said they would like PAs to also demonstrate effective multi-grade techniques when they visit classes, the PAs themselves have limited knowledge and skills in multi-grade teaching.

- **Training in multi-grade teaching has had some positive impact, particularly in terms of lesson planning:** It is clear that the training in multi-grade teaching delivered by DESB and PESS trainers supported by Plan has had some positive effect, particularly in terms of lesson planning (i.e. teachers are now doing lesson plans much of the time, using the format provided as part of the training) as well as introducing a greater variety of activities for students in their classes. Teachers are also using teaching aids, many of which they have produced themselves using materials provided by Plan and the Fast Track Initiative (FTI). However, it is clear that this initial training has not yet brought any significant improvements in the way multi-grade classes are taught.

- **Different grades are seated and taught largely separately:** Whether there were two or three grades in the same class, they were seated separately and taught mostly separately. The arrangement of the seating also appeared to influence the extent to which teachers would try a combined activity, such as a song. In seven schools, where observed grades were facing in different directions, there appeared to be no combined activities, whereas in the five classes observed where different grades were facing the same way, this seemed much more likely to happen.

- **Students spend too much time waiting for the teacher:** In 11 of the 12 schools, teachers started their lesson with the lower grade first, without assigning any work to the other grade that was waiting for the teacher. This meant that sometimes students in the upper grade were waiting up to 15 or even in one case, 20 minutes, for the teacher to assign them some work.

- **Multi-grade teaching is largely teacher centred:** Teachers tend to dominate and do most of the talking in class. Most, but not all of the teachers observed, tended to spend more time standing in front of the class than moving around among the students. While they have learned how to get students working

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1 While PAs have a classroom observation checklist from MoES (as part of monitoring under SoQ), this does not specifically focus on multi-grade classes and would appear to be seldom used in practice.
in groups, and students understand how to form groups, most did not appear to know how to support students when they are working in groups in order to ensure maximum benefit. This observation was supported by feedback from children, several of whom said their teachers did not explain lessons clearly and did not help them when they were doing activities in the class.

- **Students are disturbed by other students in multi-grade classes:** Most students who provided feedback for the multi-grade teaching study said that this was something they did not like about their class. While there was no comparison made with students in mono-grade classes, given the larger number of students commonly found in multi-grade classes, as well as the fact that teachers tended to leave students from one grade sitting idle while they worked with the other grade, the level of disturbance in multi-grade classes is likely to be higher than in mono-grade classes.

**Other Findings:** In addition to the above findings related directly to multi-grade teaching, the study also made some unexpected discoveries which relate in some way to multi-grade teaching. These include the accuracy of EMIS data, the use of reading books provided by Plan, and the role of Plan District Education Coordinators.

**EMIS Data:** Secondary data related to enrolments, repetition and dropout rates, and teacher qualifications was gathered at each school visited. However, when the data from sample schools in both districts was compared with the data for that school available in EMIS from the DESB, it was found that there were differences, particularly in enrolment, repetition and drop out numbers. This suggests that further improvements to the collection and storage of school data under EMIS are still needed.

**Reading Books:** In most of the schools visited, the reading books provided by Plan were either not being used at all or were being used only occasionally. The lack of systematic storage of these books was also a concern in several schools. Ways in which these reading books could be integrated into multi-grade classes would benefit from further exploration and could be included as a topic in future training.

**Role of Plan District Education Coordinators:** They appear to have only played a minimal role in both multi-grade teaching training provision and post-training follow-up and support. While the Coordinators face the double constraint of a significant administrative workload (e.g. provision of materials, reporting, etc.) as well as not having an academic background in education, their increased involvement in both the training and follow-up would support the PAs and contribute to positive changes in multi-grade classes.

**Recommendations:** The above findings, as well as lessons learned from multi-grade teaching situations in other countries, suggest ways in which future initiatives related to multi-grade teacher training might be enhanced in terms of quality. These recommendations include:

**That a decision needs to be made first regarding what approach to multi-grade teaching is to be promoted in Bokeo.** Given the realities of the Lao context – e.g. poor infrastructure, limited teaching and learning resources, and a history of teaching multi-grade as separate classes, it is recommended that the focus for now should be on improving what is being done already – i.e. ensuring that teachers are able to teach different grades in the same room effectively, with an emphasis on expanding the number of combined activities involving both grades.

**Review previous multi-grade teaching materials developed in the Lao PDR, as well as lessons learned from multi-grade teacher training in other countries, and adapt what might be most useful to expand on the current module and SoQ materials.** Ideally, this process will involve not only relevant Plan and MoES staff, but also others from other organisations that are currently supporting
multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR. The existing core module and SoQ materials could form the foundation for developing an enhanced multi-grade teacher training curriculum which can be used for future training in Bokeo. The proposed establishment of a Basic Education Technical Working Group\textsuperscript{2} may provide the mechanism for this review of multi-grade teacher training and module revision.

**That Plan support a ToT for teacher trainers in multi-grade teaching.** The study found that neither the PESS nor DESB trainers had received any training in the past few years in how to train teachers in multi-grade teaching, with most DESB trainers in the three target districts having received none at all. Accordingly, it is seen as essential that they receive training themselves before provision of any further training in target districts in Bokeo. Including Plan District Education Coordinators in that ToT may also help them to better support the PAs and teachers in target schools.

**That future training in multi-grade teaching for teachers in target districts is introduced in a phased manner, with a focus on quality rather than quantity.** The training provided in 2012 aimed at reaching all multi-grade teachers in all three target districts. While this has ensured that most multi-grade teachers have now received some basic training in multi-grade teaching, a more phased approach is needed for future training.

Accordingly, it is suggested that the first training using the revised module be focussed on teachers in a smaller number of schools, rather than trying to cover all multi-grade teachers in each District. Selection of these schools will need further discussion between Plan and the respective DESBs, and may include target Schools of Quality, in order to build on other additional support already provided to these schools in terms of training and materials, and/or schools poorer communities that Plan would like to focus on. In addition, Plan needs to get an undertaking that teachers who will be trained will not be moved from their multi-grade classes for at least two - three years.\textsuperscript{3}

Accordingly, it is suggested that the focus for 2013 be on improving multi-grade training and teaching in this smaller number of schools - approximately 15 schools per target district - with extension to other schools scheduled for 2014. It is also essential that all PAs responsible for monitoring and supporting teachers in these schools also participate in the training, together with Plan education staff, so that they will be better equipped to provide the kind of support that teachers already trained are requesting from DESB.

**That more time is allocated in future training to practice teaching.** Most of the multi-grade teacher training workshops held in 2012 were 3 days in duration, which did not allow sufficient time for practice teaching by the participants. Also, the practice teaching that was done appears not to have been done systematically, in that those observing the practice teaching were not given any kind of observation checklist and thus feedback seems to have been done informally.

**Follow-up support for teachers trained in multi-grade teaching needs to be planned from the outset.** This was an area found to be lacking in 2012, as there was no specific attention given to following up the multi-grade teacher training and ensuring suitable post-training support. It is recommended that a follow-up plan and schedule be developed by teachers, school principals and PAs during the multi-grade teacher training so that teachers trained will know what kind of support they can

\textsuperscript{2} Reportedly under discussion by MoES and Development Partners in Vientiane in 2012.

\textsuperscript{3} This is particularly important in Meung District, where teachers are frequently transferred after only a year or two in a particular school.
expect. The class observation form that currently exists needs to be adapted to take into account multi-grade teaching situations.

**A short mini-workshop on effective ways of observing and giving support should be conducted by trainers for PAs and school principals.** A short (half to one day) workshop needs to be organised for PAs and school principals in how to more effectively observe, provide feedback and support to multi-grade teachers after training. This would include providing demonstration teaching, something specifically requested by several teachers but which PAs and school principals have been unable to provide due to their own limited experience in multi-grade teaching.

**That special attention is given to ways in which reading books already provided by Plan could be better integrated into multi-grade classes.** As was found in the mid-term review in 2011, the use of reading books provided by Plan to each school have not been optimised. While a small number of the sample schools in the study were using the books (i.e. they allocated time for students to borrow books for reading), most were either making only limited use of these books or were not using them at all.

**That particular attention be given to helping DESB in each of the three target districts to improve the accuracy of the data they collect from schools.** The fact that there were differences between school level data and EMIS data suggests that improvements need to be made in terms of data accuracy. It is suggested that the form used to collect this quantitative data as part of the study be adapted and used to collect data regularly from schools participating in the next round of multi-grade teacher training, and that this data then provided to DESB so that they can adjust their EMIS data to ensure greater accuracy.

**Conclusions:** The picture of multi-grade teaching in the two target districts that has emerged from the study shows that while the training provided in 2012 provided a good foundation in terms of level of understanding, lesson planning and some useful activities for multi-grade classes, it did not equip teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to teach multi-grade classes effectively. The classroom observations revealed that teachers are still struggling with multi-grade teaching and would benefit from better quality training and more effective follow-up after training.

In terms of approach, given the realities of the Lao context, it would seem to make more sense to focus on improving and further developing what teachers are trying to do now – which is teach different grades in the same room largely separately (but increasing the frequency of combined activities) – rather than trying to introduce an ‘ideal’ multi-grade model of combined grades from the outset.

Most schools in the three target districts in Bokeo currently have multi-grade classes and this situation is unlikely to change, and thus it is imperative that much more attention be given to improving the quality of teaching and learning in these situations. While attempts to improve the quality of multi-grade teaching have been made in the past, their legacy has been limited. Taking a practical and low budget approach to improving multi-grade teaching in the three target districts in Bokeo has the potential to have much wider impact beyond Plan target areas, through enhancement of existing training and wider involvement of MoES and Development Partners in the process.

**2. INTRODUCTION**

Multi-grade teaching is found in most countries in the world, though the situations and often the reasons for multi-grade classes may differ. This is particularly true between countries in the West where multi-
grade teaching is often seen as enhancing the quality of learning, and those countries where it is often regarded as 'second class' education, due to the lack of teachers or limited class sizes. In the Lao PDR, it is estimated that 26% of children attending primary school are studying in multi-grade classes, with the majority of these schools found in more remote, poorer areas.\(^4\)

This study focuses on the situation with regard to multi-grade teaching in two districts in Bokeo Province in the northwest of the Lao PDR. Plan International and their Lao Government partners, with funding support from the European Union, have been supporting multi-grade teacher training as part of the \textit{Strengthening Local Governance and Participation for the Realisation of Children's Right to Education Programme}. This is a three year Programme which specifically targets the improvement of primary education in three districts - Pha Oudom, Pak Tha and Meung. These districts have all been defined by the Government as being 'poor' or 'poorest' and thus are a priority for development.

In these districts, the percentage of children in multi-grade classes at primary level is significantly higher than the national average (54% compared to the 26% national average). Of the 146 primary schools in the three target districts, 127 schools (or 87%) have at least one multi-grade classroom.\(^5\) In order to improve the quality of multi-grade teaching in target districts, Plan International has funded six training workshops for 186 teachers from 124 schools in multi-grade teaching in 2012.\(^6\) One of the main purposes of this study was to review the training that has been provided, both in terms of how well it was conducted as well as its impact in terms of teaching and learning in the classroom, in order to enhance the quality of both training as well as multi-grade teaching and learning in the future.

This report will start with an overall review of multi-grade teaching, including how it is defined and the different approaches that are used in multi-grade classrooms in different countries around the world will be outlined. Later in the report, examples of these approaches from a sample of other countries with significant numbers of multi-grade classes will be examined in more detail and lessons that have been learned which may have relevance for the Lao context will be identified. This will be followed by a description of the study undertaken in 12 primary schools in two districts in Bokeo - what was done, how and by whom. Then, the findings from the schools and districts in this study will be presented and finally, several recommendations linked to these findings will be made which will hopefully contribute to enhancing the quality of multi-grade training and teaching in the future.

3. MULTI-GRADE TEACHING - AN OVERVIEW

While multi-grade teaching exists in some form in most countries around the world, what is termed 'multi-grade' varies both in terms of definition and approach, particularly between more economically developed countries and others that have fewer education resources. There are at least two definitions of multi-grade classes.\(^7\) The first defines these as '...any class in which students of different grade levels are placed together for administrative reasons, this usually being due to a lack of teachers or low enrolment per grade. The second definition refers to '...a class that has been organised across grade levels and ages by choice and for pedagogical reasons'. In the case of countries like the Lao PDR, Vietnam, India and Sri Lanka, it is the first definition that applies, as multi-grade classes are a necessity rather than a preference.

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\(^5\) From DESB EMIS data, 2011/2012.
\(^6\) From Plan Project Beneficiary database, 2012.
\(^7\) http://multigrade.ioe.ac.uk/definitions.html#multigradeclass, Institute of Education, University of London.
Globally, it is estimated that 30% of primary school students (approximately 192.45 million) are in multi-grade classes, while in the Lao PDR, it is estimated that 26% of primary students are in such classes (up from 18% in 2001). In developing countries, the common problems encountered with the quality of teaching and learning in regular mono-grade classes may be exacerbated in multi-grade situations. A report on small, multi-grade primary schools in India found that poor classroom management, scarcity of teaching and learning support, and problems with the quality of teaching and learning, together with a lack of suitable classroom infrastructure and resources, all tended to result in unmotivated teachers, a low standard of education, and high drop-out rates for children in these multi-grade classes.

**Approaches to multi-grade teaching:** Multi-grade classes can include different approaches to teaching. For example, they may involve a single teacher teaching two or more classes separately but at the same time (sometimes in the same classroom and sometimes in different classrooms). On the other hand, the approach may involve a teacher making a lesson plan for the combined grades, in one space, with a mix of grade-specific and grade-combined activities. As Figure 1 below shows, there are also a range of approaches which fall in between these two different ways of teaching multi-grade classes - for example, a teacher teaching two or more grades separately most of the time, but including some activities, typically related to handicrafts or music, where they occasionally combine grades.

**Figure 1. Approaches to Multi-Grade Teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Separate Grades</th>
<th>Combined Grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A single teacher teaching 2 or more grades separately but at the same time  
- Teacher centred  
- Classes often face opposite directions  
- Few if any combined activities | A teacher making a programme for the combined grades, in one space, with a mix of grade-specific and grade-combined activities |
| Grades taught separately but facing same direction. Minimal combined activities – e.g. usually singing or handicrafts | Grades often combined but some separate activities and lessons |

Experience in various countries has shown that for there to be effective, combined multi-grade teaching and learning activities, the following elements need to be in place:

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8 *Investing in Multi-Grade Teaching in Indonesia - Policy Brief*, World Bank, November 2010  
9 *Teaching in Lao PDR*, Luis Benveniste, Jeffery Marshall, Lucrecia Santibañez, MoES and World Bank, 2010  
10 *Small, Multi-grade Schools and Increasing Access to Primary Education in India*, 2007, page 3  
• Supporting policy and government commitment
• Flexible, theme-oriented curricula and materials related specifically to multi-grade teaching that is based on the national curriculum
• Teachers trained in, and applying, active, child-centred, participatory, cooperative, and self-paced teaching-learning methodologies
• A flexible, attractive, child-focused classroom environment
• Strong relevance to the local context and culture
• Active parental and community involvement

In countries where there are insufficient teachers, and/or smaller schools in more remote areas with low enrolments per grade, and limited resources allocated for education, many of these elements are not in place. Multi-grade teaching in these situations is often seen by communities, teachers and government as being sub-standard to the classic situation of one teacher per grade. In the Lao PDR, multi-grade teaching is often seen in this way, as an undesirable but necessary reality, due to lack of teachers and resources.\textsuperscript{12}

4. THE STUDY - PURPOSE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Purpose and Scope of the Study

The overall purpose of the study of multi-grade teaching in Bokeo province was to assess the effectiveness of the initiatives supported by Plan International in 2012. These initiatives aim to improve the quality of multi-grade teaching in target schools, both in terms of process (i.e. in-service teacher training) as well as to assess changes that might have taken place in the classroom as a direct result of the training. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inform not only future support for improving multi-grade teaching and learning in Plan International target areas, but also possibly contribute to reviewing and improving other multi-grade initiatives in other provinces in the Lao PDR.

Based on the Terms of Reference (refer to Appendix I), the objectives of the multi-grade school study were:

1. To survey the current teaching practices in multi-grade classrooms
2. To determine the main challenges faced by multi-grade teachers and suggest practical solutions
3. To examine current training Programmes on multi-grade teaching in Laos, including the training module run by government and other development partners.
4. To determine the training techniques for use in the future.
5. To describe successful multi-grade teaching techniques and concepts in other countries and make suggestions for piloting in Laos.

To meet these objectives, the study interviewed those involved in preparing and delivering multi-grade teaching training, those who received the training, as well as those responsible for supporting and monitoring teachers in their classrooms. In addition, secondary data was gathered from a range of sources, including MoES, PESS and DESB, and other countries. Classroom observation of multi-grade

\textsuperscript{12} Almost all teachers and school principals interviewed as part of this study appeared to hold this view, with the most common suggestion being for DESB to provide more teachers.
classes was also conducted, and statistical data gathered from the 12 sample schools visited in the two target districts, Meung and Pak Tha. Within the 12 sample schools, 10 principals, 13 multi-grade teachers and 48 VEDC members were interviewed. In addition, 106 children participated in an activity in which they expressed their views regarding what they liked and disliked about their multi-grade classes. The children also provided suggestions on how to improve teaching and learning within their schools (refer to Appendix 2, People Interviewed), for more details on those interviewed as part of the study).

Table 2. Scope of the Multi-grade Teaching Study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Multi-grade teaching in other countries</td>
<td>Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>What has been done before and what is being done currently</td>
<td>MoES, Development Partners, Plan staff, Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>Current situation re MGT training and follow-up</td>
<td>PESS, Plan staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>MGT training and follow-up; data on schools</td>
<td>DESB Trainers, PAs, and Plan staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>(i) Multi-grade teaching practices (strengths and weaknesses); (ii) Training, impact of training and (iii) follow-up support post-training</td>
<td>Teachers, School Heads, VEDC members, Grade 4/5 students; secondary data; class observation; school observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Methodology And Instruments

The study gathered a range of both qualitative and quantitative information using several different methods and different instruments (refer to Table 3 below). The study team involved nine people - the consultant, the Plan International ECCD/BEP Programme Officer, a senior trainer from Bokeo PESS, and three staff each from Meung and Pak Tha DESBs.

Prior to undertaking the study, a half day preparation workshop was conducted with the team to introduce the purpose of the study and familiarise them with the methodology and instruments, before gathering data in sample schools. Team members were also assigned roles that minimised as much as possible the danger of bias. For example, DESB staff from the district where schools were being visited were assigned to conduct the school observation, gather school enrolment data, and interview VEDC members. The consultant observed classes and interviewed teachers, to avoid DESB trainers interviewing the teachers they had trained previously.

At the end of each day, the individual teams met to consolidate the data collected and to carry out initial analysis. This consolidated data was recorded in a table format for later use in developing the findings and recommendations for future programming.

Additional interviews were carried out by the consultant with relevant staff from Save the Children International (SCI), UNICEF, and the Deputy Director General of the Department of Primary Education,
Ministry of Education and Sports, who had previously been involved in developing the multi-grade training curriculum.

Table 3. Methods and Instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key informant interviews</td>
<td>Interview guides</td>
<td>These were conducted with several people including the Deputy Director General of Primary Education at MoES, UNICEF and SCI, Plan staff, PESS and DESB staff, teachers and school principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group interviews</td>
<td>Interview guide</td>
<td>Group interviews were conducted with VEDC members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities with children (upper grades)</td>
<td>Group activity with key questions, games, and songs</td>
<td>Children from grades 4 and 5 gave their perspective of the multi-grade classes they experienced. This was done in a child-friendly manner in order to maximise their input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class observation</td>
<td>Classroom observation sheet</td>
<td>Approximately 1 hour was spent observing multi-grade classes in each of the 12 schools visited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School observation</td>
<td>School observation form</td>
<td>This involved looking at the school environment overall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering secondary data (statistics, training documents, etc.)</td>
<td>School statistics form</td>
<td>The school statistics form gathered data on enrolments, ethnicity, repetition and dropout rates, and teachers. This was later compared to DESB EMIS data (refer to Section 8.5 Other Findings); Plan also maintains a database on activities conducted which provided useful information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Enabling Factors and Constraints

In conducting the study into multi-grade teaching, there were factors that both contributed to implementation of the study as well as some constraints. In terms of enabling factors, the support of the Ministry of Education and Sports at all levels was very helpful in facilitating this study. Ajaan Keun Saysanavongxay, Deputy Director General of the Department of Primary Education gave both his time for an interview as well as providing the multi-grade teacher training module currently being used for in-service training. Ajaan Somsang Sayatom, a teacher trainer from the Bokeo PESS and staff from Meung and Pak Tha district DESBs (see Appendix 3 for a list of Team members), helped organise the schedule.
and assisted the multi-grade study in both districts. These team members were also interviewed with regard to multi-grade teacher training and follow-up and provided useful information which helped inform the findings and recommendations of this report.

While there were some constraining factors, these did not have any significant negative impact on the study. The use of PESS and DESB staff who had also been involved in the multi-grade teacher training and follow-up after the training had the potential to influence the responses of those interviewed, as they may have given more positive, 'ideal' answers to those perceived as being authority figures. This potential impact was minimised by the consultant interviewing teachers and observing classes, and not having DESB staff interviewing teachers and school principals from the same district.13

The other limitation was lack of time to explore what had happened previously in terms of multi-grade teacher training nationally. Following the field study in Bokeo, further interviews were conducted in Vientiane. At that point, it was learned that there had been at least two major initiatives to improve multi-grade teacher training over the past decade, but there was insufficient time to explore these in more depth. Section 7. Background below outlines these earlier initiatives, but more information is needed in order to see what might have relevance for improving the quality of multi-grade teacher training in Bokeo province in 2013 (Refer to Section 8. Recommendations for more on this).

5. BACKGROUND

Given the priority set by the Government of the Lao PDR and MoES to achieve both MDG and EFA goals by 2015, as well as the higher proportion of multi-grade schools in poorer and more remote districts which are targets for development under the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES), it is not surprising that there have been a number of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR over the past 10 – 15 years. In 2000, UNICEF commissioned an evaluation of the Teacher Upgrading Programme (1998 - 2001), which included an assessment of multi-grade teaching.14 The Lao Australia Basic Education Programme (LABEP) which ran from 1998 - 2007 under the lead of ADB, also had an area of focus on multi-grade teaching and produced several training and teaching resource materials. A number of international NGOs have also supported DESBs in several provinces to conduct multi-grade teacher training courses.

In terms of overall national education policy, multi-grade teaching does get some mention in the Education Sector Development Framework/Plan 15 (ESDP) as a means to reduce the number of incomplete schools as well as being included as a topic in the Schools of Quality training manual. While there was insufficient time to assess what was being done in terms of pre-service teacher training in Teacher Training Institutions (TTIs), teachers interviewed said that either it was not covered at all or was only covered briefly in the pre-service teacher training curriculum. This section briefly reviews what has happened over the past decade with regard to multi-grade teaching and teacher training, particularly in terms of in-service teacher training, and what might still have relevance today from these earlier initiatives.

13 Rather, those team members working in their own district were assigned to gather school enrolment data, conduct the overall school observation, and interview VEDC members only.
15 The ESDF was produced in January 2009 and later renamed the ESDP
5.1 Policy Level - Ministry of Education and Sports

Since 2000, there has been an increasing focus on policy development in the education sector, as seen in the development of the Education Strategic Vision by 2010 and 2020 (2000), Government of Lao PDR National Education System Reform Strategy 2006–15, the Education Law (July 2007), The Ministry of Educations’ EFA Mid-Decade Assessment (March 2008) and the Education Sector Development Framework/Plan 2009–2015.16

While the Education Strategic Vision by 2010 and 2020 makes reference to strengthening multi-grade teaching, it is not mentioned in the Reform Strategy, which emphasises the need to improve teacher capacity and teaching methodologies. The EFA Mid-Decade Assessment refers to multi-grade schools, but it is more in the context of enabling incomplete schools to become complete schools.17 The Education Development Framework/Plan (2009 - 2015) also refers to the need to further develop multi-grade teaching.

As a review of relevant education policy documents shows, there is some acknowledgement of the need for improved multi-grade teaching, particularly in terms of reducing the number of incomplete schools, but it does not have a specific focus at the overall policy level. As the ESDP indicates, improving multi-grade teaching has been included in the Schools of Quality model currently being introduced nationwide, but there have also been several other initiatives over the past decade aimed at improving the quality of multi-grade teaching. The next section reviews initiatives undertaken, including the UNICEF supported Teacher Upgrading Programme (TUP), the Lao Australian Basic Education Progam (LABEP), and the Schools of Quality (SoQ) Programme currently being implemented, including in schools in target districts in Bokeo Province.

5.2 Improving the Quality of Multi-grade Teaching - Past and Current Initiatives

The past decade has seen at least three initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools, including multi-grade teaching. These include TUP, LABEP and SoQ. Each of these is described and examined briefly below, particularly in terms of the extent to which they have tried to address issues related to multi-grade teaching.

**Teacher Upgrading Programme (TUP):** In 1991, the Lao Ministry of Education and UNICEF, with support from other donors and NGOs, began a Programme aimed at upgrading the skills of untrained and unqualified teachers, particularly in provinces with poor education indicators and a large percentage of ethnic groups. Managed by the Teacher Development Department, the TUP Programme included

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16. Improving the Provision of Basic Education Services for the Poor, Lao PDR case study, AusAID, April 2009
17. EFA Mid-Decade Assessment
both residential and in-school support for teachers and ran for 10 years, until 2001. There was a particular focus on working through school clusters (including the establishment of cluster resource centres) and on training teachers for multi-grade classroom teaching.

**Figure 2. Relevant Recommendations - Teacher Upgrading Program Evaluation (2000)**

- Training of multi-grade teachers is a priority. Follow up training and supervision must be provided regularly at the local level.
- That a policy of 'positive discrimination' for incomplete and multi-grade schools, be implemented, that includes:
  - teachers recruited for incomplete schools be already trained in multi-grade methodologies so that those schools may become complete schools;
  - prioritise in-service training in multi-grade methodologies for remote schools;
  - ensure that the 'Multi-grade Resource Book' is distributed to all multi-grade teachers;
  - address the issue of class size for multi-grade schools, to ensure multi-grade classrooms have no more than 30 children.
- That training in multi-grade methodologies be provided to the following people so that they are able to provide assistance and technical support to multi-grade teachers;
  - Principals and Head Teachers of cluster schools
  - Pedagogical Advisors
  - District Heads of Education
  - Heads of the Teacher Upgrading Centres
  - Trainers at the Teacher Upgrading Centres
- That the *Handbook on Multi-grade Teaching for Trainers* be produced and distributed to trainers in conjunction with the appropriate in-service training.

With regard to multi-grade teaching, an evaluation of the TUP Programme in 2000 found that grades were largely being taught separately, usually in the same classroom, with only one grade being taught at a time while others waited for the teacher to come and teach their grade. The report highlighted the fact that the training provided in multi-grade teaching was too short, that there needed to be more time spent on teaching strategies and classroom management techniques for multi-grade classrooms and that there was a need for more follow-up support from the trainers to assist the teachers after they returned to the classroom. In addition, the evaluation found that the existing Multi-Grade Teaching Module failed to meet the needs of both trainees and trainers. It was also noted that there was a need to ensure that principals and technical teachers in a cluster were trained in appropriate multi-grade methodologies, so they could offer support to the teachers within their cluster. As the findings from this study will later show (see Figure 2 below), many of the findings and recommendations from the evaluation still remain valid today, 12 years later.

**Lao Australian Basic Education Programme**: The Lao-Australia Basic Education Programme (LABEP), an AusAID-funded Programme with funding support from ADB, ran from 1999 to 2008 and focussed on the educational needs of primary school children from ethnic groups. Over 4000 teachers completed in-service training in multi-grade teaching and the use of teaching and learning materials produced by the Programme. Practical educational models were adopted, including multi-grade teaching, as well as teacher training targeting young women from ethnic communities and remote villages.

Teaching materials and approaches were also developed targeting children for whom Lao was not a

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19 Technical teachers were skilled teachers working in schools within a cluster who were assigned to support other teachers.
their mother tongue. Multi-grade teaching modules were also developed for teacher trainees in teacher training institutes (see Figure 3 below for an outline of one of the modules).

**Figure 3. Sample - Multi-grade Teacher Training Module Outline- LABEP (2004)**

**Purpose:**
To introduce and explore the theory and practice of multi-grade teaching and learning for the Lao PDR context.

**Objectives:**
1. To develop participant’s beliefs and understandings about multi-grade;
2. To discuss the benefits and disadvantages of different models of multi-grade teaching;
3. To develop participants understandings about what is involved in teaching a multi-grade class;
4. To develop understandings about the role of the teacher in multi-grade classrooms;
5. To carry out observations of multi-grade teaching and analyse the observations;
6. To plan multi-grade lessons using the primary general education curriculum and text books;
7. To discuss and plan how to teach about multi-grade teaching in primary teacher training courses.

**Units:**
Unit 1: Multi-grade: Introduction
Unit 2: Models of Multi-grade Teaching
Unit 3: Observation of a Multi-grade Classroom
Unit 4: Planning for Multi-grade classes
Unit 5: Multi-grade teaching for teacher trainee students

**Post Workshop Tasks**
1. During the Field Trip, carry out observations of multi-grade teaching and learning using an observation guide.
2. Analyse the observations with reference to how children learn and learner centred teaching and learning.
3. In groups of two or three, plan a lesson for a 2 or 3 grade Multi-grade class.

**Schools of Quality (SoQ):** Known globally as the Child Friendly School model, this ‘whole school’ approach to school development has been supported by UNICEF and other Development Partners in many countries around the world. First piloted in the Lao PDR in 2006, it underwent a name change to Schools of Quality and the model has now been mainstreamed by the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports and has been included in the ESDP as the most appropriate model for primary education development. It is currently being implemented nationwide, including in Plan International’s target districts in Bokeo Province.

The SoQ model has six dimensions or core elements, including

- Inclusive of all children
- Effective teaching and learning which is relevant to children’s lives
- Healthy, safe and protective environments
- Gender responsive environments
- Pupils, parents and community participation

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20 Annual program performance report for the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2007–08, AusAID, October 2008
- Effective school management and leadership.

With support from UNICEF, several manuals have been produced to support the effective implementation of SoQ, including SoQ Implementation Guidelines, procedures and curriculum for training teachers, school principals, VEDC members and Pedagogical Advisors, and a manual for school principals on school assessment and planning.

In-service training modules include:\(^2^2\)

- Using the Primary curriculum
- Participatory learning-teaching (child centred teaching approach).
- Using questions
- Teaching an inclusive classroom
- Teaching ethnic children
- Arranging the classroom and school environment
- Progressive measurement of results
- **Multi-grade classroom teaching**\(^2^3\)
- Teaching health education
- Production and use of teaching materials
- Community relations and others

A review of the teacher training manual for SoQ found that there is only one activity (2 pages) related to multi-grade teaching (i.e. Activity 4) which is part of the training ‘package’ currently being delivered to teachers, school principals and others. This activity introduces the teachers to the differences between teaching single grade and multi-grade classes, techniques for teaching 2 or more classes separately, with the possibility of some joint activities. While this provides an introduction to multi-grade teaching, it does not provide teachers with the more in-depth knowledge and skills that are required to teach multi-grade classes effectively.

A multi-grade teacher training module was produced by MoES in 2007, possibly drawing from the earlier TUP and/or LABEP materials, and this is the core module currently being used to train teachers in addition to the SoQ materials. However, while covering the main aspects of multi-grade teaching in detail, it does not provide much in the way of practical activities to help teachers understand how to teach multi-grade classes more effectively.

### 5.3 Multi-grade Teaching in Other Countries - Three Case Studies\(^2^4\)

As was mentioned above, the Lao PDR is one of many countries globally that implements multi-grade teaching quite widely. Reviewing the successes and challenges experienced in other developing countries in the implementation of multi-grade teaching where, as in the Lao PDR, it is seen as a necessity due to limited numbers of teachers and/or low enrolment by grade, may provide a useful comparison as well as some pointers which might help inform further development of multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR in the future. In this section, the situation in three other countries - Colombia,
Vietnam, and India - with similar educational contexts (in terms of limited resources, insufficient teachers, small and remote schools, etc.), are examined below, and some common features which may have relevance for multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR are identified.

**Case study 1 – Vietnam**

*Education Context/ Background*

Vietnam has 2,162 multi-grade schools that combine two, three, four, or five different grades in a single classroom. Most of these are located in remote or isolated places where the general population have limited incomes. They are also located in areas that have a high number of ethnic minorities which further necessitates support in mother tongue teaching and learning, bilingual education and or second language teaching.

Multi-grade classes are seen as beneficial in these situations because there are limited numbers of teachers overall in Vietnam, and it provides an education to those children living in remote or underserved areas. Although the national requirement in Vietnam for qualified teacher status is 12 years of schooling and two years of teacher training college, the Government will accept nine years of schooling with three years of teacher training college as the norm for multi-grade schools. These teachers are termed ‘standard’ teachers. However, there are also some teachers with less than nine years of schooling and two - three years of teacher training; in these situations the teachers are termed 'non-standard'. The teachers usually understand and use only mono-grade teaching methodology, rather than multi-grade. The content of the national curriculum, any available teaching and learning materials, and activities taught at schools are usually designed geared for mono-grade classes and thus not appropriate for students in multi-grade classes.

*Current MGT situation*

A UNICEF supported Programme in the 1990s trained over 7000 multi-grade teachers in more than 2500 multi-grade primary schools specifically in ethnic minority areas. Over half of these teachers were women and over 1700 from ethnic minority groups. These teachers received an incentive allowance of an additional 50% of the basic teachers salary where they taught two grades and 75% where they taught three or more grades. Within this Programme there was training provided in the familiarisation and implementation of 11 modules that focussed on active teaching and learning methodologies, bilingual education, second language teaching and how to make the classroom a welcoming place. There was not a focus on managing multi-grade classes and the training was limited in quantity and quality. The Programme multi-grade classes followed a special multi-grade syllabus that linked to the national curriculum and students sat the standard national examinations at the end of the school year.

*Results*

One of the prime recommendations from the joint UNICEF and Ministry of Education and Training multi-grade Programme was that there was a need for specific materials and resources specifically focussing on multi-grade teaching. These resources should be for the students, teachers and administrators.

*Challenges*

For the implementation of multi-grade teaching and learning in Vietnam, there were a number of challenges, many of which are also faced in regular schools. These included a lack of facilities (buildings
and chairs/tables etc.), very limited teaching and learning resources, and even less focus on multi-grade classes.

In addition, many of the teachers in these multi-grade schools were not from the same geographical area, meaning that they had limited knowledge and understanding of the culture of the area and usually did not speak the local language. This may have had an impact on the participation of the community, as teachers from other provinces may have had difficulties in adjusting to the local situation. Participation from the community is one element identified in Section 3: Multi-grade Teaching: Approaches to Multi-grade as being essential for successful multi-grade schools.

Many multi-grade teachers had received limited training (in-service or pre-service) and the training received was usually theoretical, with little attention placed on actual multi-grade teaching and learning methods. This resulted in traditional teaching methods being used, with little participation from children.

**Case Study 2 - India**

**Education context/background**

Multi-grade teaching is not a new phenomenon in India, with its roots being traced back to Government policy in the 1960s. At this time, grades were abolished and there were a number of learning units for students to complete at their own pace. However, this has been superseded by the more 'traditional' grades or year groups, with children being expected to achieve a certain level by the end of the school year for promotion to the next grade.

In 2005, 78% of primary schools in India had three or less teachers to teach across all grades with 55% of primary schools having enrolment numbers of 100 students or less. A common characteristic of these schools was that they were found in poorer, rural communities. Schools may be Government or NGO run or a combination of both. A significant proportion of the Government schools have been established since 1990, particularly because of the Education for All initiative, and access to primary school for many children has increased. However, these schools are often characterised as providing poor quality education with teachers having to do multiple administrative tasks as well as teach multi-grade classes. Infrastructure and other facilities are limited and often of low quality.

As there is no national policy on multi-grade teaching, educators at state and school levels have had to find their own solutions, sometimes through collaboration with NGOs. However, previous initiatives by the Government to promote multi-grade classes have resulted in some advocates at the National level, and within the 2005 National Education Plan, there is reference to a small school approach with the recognition that comprehensive guidelines are required. Unfortunately, at present, there has been no further movement on this requirement of specific materials for multi-grade classes and the focus remains on regular mono-grade schools.

While both pre-service and in-service teacher training have modules on multi-grade teaching, these tend to be more theoretical, and practice teaching tends to take place in mono-grade schools near urban areas. As a result, teachers in multi-grade classrooms tend to teach each grade separately, with one grade either waiting or given tasks to keep them busy while the teacher teaches the other grade.

**Current MGT situation**
The Ministry of Education, supported by UN agencies, instituted the Janshala Programme (1992-2005) which focussed on improving teaching and learning in multi-grade schools. This was replaced by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Programme, but many of the earlier initiatives have been reduced or cut completely, with a focus remaining on mono-grade schools.

Although national government Programmes have been cut, there are various NGOs working in the area of multi-grade teaching in various provinces across India. These Programmes have seen some considerable success, including the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Research (RIVER) Programme in Andra Pradesh. RIVER is working in remote, rural areas in small schools with a specially developed curriculum that has taken the subject content of the national curriculum, but uses local examples and context. RIVER’s approach is innovative in that they have stopped organising classes by grades, and have learning ladders for which children complete activity cards at their own pace, with the teacher providing support to different groups of children within the class. A child may complete a learning ladder in a year or he/she may take a longer or lesser time. Children within their different groups will be of different ages and can thus learn other important, social and emotional skills. Intensive ongoing teacher training is provided to teachers and the community is heavily involved with the school through field trips, surveys, visits to the school as well as involving the community in the management of the school.

**Results**

The RIVER idea is being taken up in other areas of India (and globally) though RIVER emphasises the need for locally produced materials that are relevant to the local context. RIVER will only allow the Programme to be taken up in other localities if policy makers make a 2-3 day visit to RIVER schools, and then attend a 10 day training involving teachers, education supervisors and community members. RIVER also requires any new project areas to begin in a small number of selected schools initially so that the locally produced material can be continuously adapted and improved until it meets the needs of the students.

RIVER schools show decreases in dropout rates, increased attendance and more children pass the Year Six examination. 75% of students in RIVER multi-grade schools achieve the required grade competencies compared to 25% in Government run multi-grade primary schools. These gains are also attributed to the community involvement in all aspects of the school including the recruitment of locals to be teachers.

**Challenges**

There have been various challenges encountered with the RIVER Programme, including:

- **Changing the perception that multi-grade teaching is second rate:** The Indian Government at all levels and communities need to recognise that multi-grade should not be seen as second rate education but an effective way for students to learn in schools with limited enrolment and less teachers than are present in a ‘regular’ mono-grade school. This is compounded by the lack of available research on the effectiveness of multi-grade approaches.

- **Ensuring adequate resources to develop appropriate multi-grade teaching materials:** This requires a financial investment in order to produce locally relevant curriculum materials that cater for multi-grade classes and the specialised ongoing, practical training and support that is required.
Ensuring community involvement in poorer communities: Finally, community involvement in the management of the school and in decisions affecting students is important and can be difficult in less economically advantaged communities where small multi-grade schools are often found.

Case study 3 – Colombia

Background/ Education context

During the 1960’s, only 18.3% of children in Columbia completed primary school. Schools were in poor condition and lacked teaching and learning resources, and thus UNESCO supported the establishment of ‘unitary schools’ where there was one teacher to teach all grades in schools in rural areas where there was low urban enrolment. These schools had an automatic promotion policy from one grade to the next, and allowed students to go at their own pace with specific materials and resources developed for multi-grade classes. Initially the Programme was successful but after it was expanded from the initial 150 schools, there were issues with the effectiveness of the teacher training as well as the automatic promotion policy.

In the mid 1970’s, the Escuela Nueva Programme was initiated to address these issues. The Columbian Ministry of Education (MoE) decided to incorporate and scale up the Programme, appointing one of the key innovators to a senior position within the Ministry to oversee expansion and development of the Escuela Nueva Programme. By 1989, the Programme had reached 17,948 primary schools.

Current MGT situation

The national government run Escuela Nueva Programme is being implemented nationwide in many small schools. It is characterised by a specific multi-grade curriculum that has its roots in the national curriculum, with student and teacher guides being produced that are locally relevant. Students are allowed to work at their own pace and there is no automatic promotion between grades. The communities are encouraged to be involved in school matters including the organisation of the school calendar which may be structured to accommodate various agricultural events - e.g. harvesting and planting. To support effective implementation of the multi-grade curriculum, there is government run training for teachers three times a year for a period of one week each time. This is supplemented by follow up support from government pedagogical advisors plus monthly school cluster meetings.

Results

There has been some extensive assessments conducted on the success of the Escuela Nueva Programme and it has shown that learning outcomes are better than for children in single class ‘traditional’ rural schools in communities with similar socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, student and community participation is seen to be greater in Escuela Nueva schools than in other schools. Schools in other countries in Latin America have adopted the model and there has been interest from other parts of the world including Timor Leste, with senior Timorese education officials undertaking a study visit in 2011 to see if the model could be replicated in Timor Leste.

Challenges

Obviously as well as successes there have been some challenges encountered along the way in the implementation of the Escuela Nueva model and these include:
• The length of time it took from initial application to when the National Government was fully supporting the Programme 100%. In this instance, it took 15 years, and there are still issues with provincial governments who continue to find it difficult to understand that multi-grade teaching is an effective alternative to mono-grade schools, especially in situations where enrolments are low and there are limited teachers.

• The quality of the multi-grade teaching after it has been rolled out to other areas of the country. The reasons for this included a decrease in the amount of training provided and that there were insufficient resources (student and teacher guides) for all students and teachers.

• Training costs are higher than for mono-grade schools. Multi-grade teachers receive three times as much training as mono-grade teachers do, and this requires a larger budget commitment from the Government. Implementation costs of Escuela Nueva are estimated at being 5-10% higher than regular schools. However, it needs to be countered with the realisation that this will still be cheaper than recruiting individual teachers for grades in these schools.

Key Aspects with Possible Relevance for the Lao PDR:

The country case studies outlined above highlight a number of aspects which may have some relevance in terms of informing future support by Plan International for multi-grade teaching in Bokeo as well as initiatives related to multi-grade teaching in other provinces. While each country context is different, multi-grade teaching in the 3 countries described briefly above do share some common characteristics:

• The majority of primary schools in rural areas have multi-grade classes.
• Many of these schools are in poorer or more remote communities.
• Schools lack both teaching and learning resources as well as adequate infrastructure.
• While Ministries of Education have given some attention to addressing the needs of multi-grade classes and schools, the dominant paradigm is mono-grade instruction, except for Colombia and the RIVER model in India.
• A specific curriculum for multi-grade that is locally relevant but based on the national curriculum has contributed to more effective multi-grade teaching.
• Teachers require specific training on multi-grade techniques and on how to use the student and teacher guides that are necessary for effective implementation of multi-grade.
• One off trainings are insufficient for effective multi-grade teaching; it must be supplemented by longer term support from education officials, as well as regular training.

Relevant points from the 3 country situations outlined above that could inform further development of effective support for multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR include:

Ideally, development of multi-grade teaching requires commitment at the national level. There needs to be clear national policy and commitment to supporting improvement in multi-grade teaching. Budgetary commitment needs to be provided for the production of student and teacher guides as well as regular teacher training and support through school visits from Education Department staff.

Appropriate teacher training is essential, both in pre-service and in-service training. Quality in-service training for multi-grade teachers needs to be implemented systematically and regularly. Both the RIVER Programme as well as Escuela Neuva place a strong emphasis on intensive and regular training for teachers in multi-grade schools.
**Ongoing support for teachers in multi-grade classrooms is essential:** At school level, teachers need support both from pedagogical advisors and from other teachers through a strong school cluster system. For example, multi-grade teachers in the Escola Neuva Programme meet with other teachers in their cluster once a month to share ideas, discuss problems, etc.

**Multi-grade teaching needs to be addressed at the pre-service teacher training level as well as in-service:** Pre-service teacher training also needs to better prepare teachers for multi-grade classrooms, not just covering theory, but also ensuring trainee teachers can practice teach in multi-grade classrooms. This is only likely to happen when there is commitment by the Ministry of Education to focus on improving the quality of multi-grade teaching.

### 5.4 Conclusions

Both the earlier initiatives to develop the quality of multi-grade teaching—specifically the TUP and LABEP—as well as the three case studies outlined above, have implications for future support to improve multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR, and more specifically, for Plan International’s support for basic education in Bokeo. Lessons learned, as well as resource materials produced earlier, can help inform future efforts to enhance multi-grade teacher training and teaching.

As the recommendations later in this report will show, a review of the materials developed earlier both in TUP and LABEP, as well as lessons learned from similar Programmes in other countries, may provide the 'missing pieces' needed to develop the core module into effective materials for training multi-grade teachers. In addition, the case studies from other countries highlight the need for quality training and ongoing support for teachers in multi-grade classrooms, both of which were found to be largely lacking in the districts and schools visited as part of this study. Findings from these districts and schools are outlined in the following section.

### 6. FINDINGS

In order to review what had been done in Plan International’s target districts regarding in-service training in multi-grade teaching, as well as multi-grade teaching practices, and what changes might have occurred in the classroom as a result of this training, a field visit was made to 12 schools in two target districts, Meung and Pak Tha. This section presents findings related to training in multi-grade teaching and what was observed in the sample of schools visited in terms of teaching practices. Firstly, the multi-grade teacher training conducted in the two target districts in 2012 is briefly reviewed, and then the findings are described in more detail for each of the two districts. Finally, some conclusions are drawn based on these findings.

### 6.1 Multi-Grade Teacher Training Overall

The multi-grade teacher training supported by Plan International in 2012 used the core module that was provided by MoES (refer to Appendix 4). The PESS trainers had last received some training from the master trainers from MoES in how to train teachers in multi-grade teaching in 2008. PESS trainers were only involved in delivering the training in multi-grade teaching in Meung District, but not in Pak Tha or Pha Oudom Districts, where the DESB trainers were responsible for organising the workshops. However, DESB trainers in these two districts had not received any training themselves related to multi-grade teaching and thus developed the training workshop themselves, using the core module from MoES
as a guide. Overall, 186 teachers from 124 schools in the three target districts were trained in multi-grade teaching in 2012.

The PESS Trainer interviewed said that for the training in Meung District, they used the core module from MoES to cover the theoretical aspects, which were delivered primarily through lectures, assisted by the use of flip charts (particularly for the lesson planning where sample lesson plans were displayed). Presentation of ‘theory’ covered the first day of the workshops with preparation for practice teaching taking another day, and then actual practice teaching taking from one - three days (depending on whether the workshop was three days or five days). The core module was the only training curriculum used, and the only handouts provided were copied from the module. Discussion of possible follow-up support for teachers after the training was not included in the workshop. Findings related both to the training and results of the training in each of the 2 Districts visited are outlined in the following sections below.

6.2 Meung District

6.3.1 Background

In the 2011/2012 school year, Meung District had a total of 31 primary schools of which 26 had at least one multi-grade class. Of these 26 schools, 18 had two multi-grade classes. Training in multi-grade teaching, funded by Plan, was provided to 73 teachers in Meung District in two separate workshops in 2012. The first workshop was five days and the second three days. The training was delivered mainly by PESS trainers with DESB trainers and at least one PA in a support role.

The study of multi-grade teaching involved a sample of six (or 23%) of the schools with multi-grade classes in the District. In selecting the schools, an effort was made to get a variety of multi-grade schools, including a range of different grades, different ethnic groups, schools both closer to and further from the District town, and at least one school targeted as a School of Quality (SoQ).

Table 4. Sample School Details - Meung District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Multi-grade Classes</th>
<th>Predominant Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Distance from District Town</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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25 However, whether PESS trainers were involved or not appears to have had little impact on outcomes in terms of changes in the classroom as a result of training.

26 Project Beneficiary Data, Plan International, Lao PDR. 2012

27 Although somewhat repetitious, findings for each of the 2 Districts are presented separately to enable translation and submission for separate reports to each of the DESBs, as requested by the Head of the Meung DESB.

28 Meung DESB EMIS data, 2012

29 Length of training was apparently determined by budget availability.
### School Name | Multi-grade Classes | Predominant Ethnic Group | Distance from District Town | Comments
---|---|---|---|---
Phoung Hin | Grade 1+2; 3+4; | Lahu | 27 km | Target SoQ; Teachers attended 2012 training
Thamphabath | Grade 2+5; 3+4 | Kuy | 44 km | Multi-grade teachers did not attend 2012 training
Phonchalearn | Grade 1+3+4; 2+5 | Akha | 6 km | Teachers attended 2012 training
Monleam | Grade 1+2 | Akha | 9 km | Target SoQ; Teachers attended 2012 training
Sengdao | Grade 1+2; 3+4 | Leu | 16 km | Target SoQ; Teachers attended 2012 training
Phadum | Grade 1+2; 3+4+5 | Leu | 25 km | More remote - access difficult; Teachers attended 2012 training

### 6.3.2 Findings
The study, particularly at school level, focussed on three main areas:

a) Training provided in multi-grade training, supported by Plan;

b) Follow-up support following training,

c) Multi-grade teaching practices being used in the sample schools.

The findings for each of these areas is covered separately below.

a) Training:
Multi-grade teachers who were interviewed and had their classes observed in five of the six sample schools visited had received training in multi-grade teaching in 2012. Some had attended the five day training while others attended the second three day training. One complication in Meung District is that teachers and school principals are often moved to other schools, so that teachers trained in multi-grade teaching in the 2011/2012 school year may find themselves assigned to a single grade class in the 2012/2013 school year.

Overall, the teachers who joined the training and were interviewed as part of this study reported that they found it useful, particularly in terms of lesson planning (and using one format for lesson plans for different grades) and introducing some activities they could use with their students. However, they all felt the training could be improved and had a number of specific suggestions as to how this could be done, including:

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30 It appeared that the process of finalising selection of SoQ target schools was still underway, as it was not clear whether these schools had actually been selected already or were still under consideration as potential SoQ.

31 Combination of grades was reportedly decided by DESB, based on enrolment numbers per grade.

32 In Thamphabaht School, only 1 teacher participated in the 2012 training but is not teaching a multi-grade class, while the school principal and a teacher who are now teaching multi-grade classes did not join the training, as they were not teaching multi-grade classes at that time.

33 Refer to Section 7. Recommendations, for a specific recommendation related to this.
More time for practice teaching with actual students. This was particularly the case for the majority of teachers interviewed who had only attended the three day training, as the majority of the teachers participating did not get the chance to practice teach at all.

Trainers should demonstrate multi-grade teaching in actual classes. While trainers explained multi-grade teaching methods, several participants interviewed said they would like to see the trainers demonstrate these (However, as the trainers in Pak Tha and Pha Oudom Districts have not previously been trained in training others in multi-grade teaching, they would clearly need further training themselves before they could do that effectively).

Training should focus on specific grades. Teachers felt that there should be a grade specific focus as well, particularly for combined first and second grade classes. Because these early grade students are new to the school environment, teachers reported finding it particularly challenging to hold their attention, and would like specific training in how to manage these early grades in a multi-grade setting.

Provide more handouts or a teacher's guide for multi-grade teachers. Very few handouts were given to participants in the workshop, which meant teachers had to rely on their notes or their memory when they returned to teach in their schools.34

b) Follow-up support after training:
While this was not discussed during the training workshop, it was assumed that the pedagogical advisors (PAs) would be responsible for monitoring and supporting teachers after the multi-grade training. Multi-grade teachers were asked about the support they received after the training from their school principals, fellow teachers, PAs and others, and at least one PA was interviewed. Findings were as follows:

School principals observe multi-grade classes and provide advice: In all of the schools visited, teachers reported that principals visited their classes and provided advice on teaching methodology (though not necessarily focused on multi-grade teaching). This ranged from formal observation and feedback twice per year to informal weekly visits to the class. The fact that principals are also teachers themselves, often of multi-grade classes, limits the time they can allocate for this.

Pedagogical Advisors visit multi-grade classes on average twice per year but not necessarily focused on multi-grade. Teachers and principals reported that PAs observe their multi-grade classes and give feedback and advice during these visits. However, it appears that the PAs did not specifically follow up the multi-grade training to support teachers in the classroom. While there is a classroom observation checklist as one of the DESB monitoring tools, this is not specifically designed for multi-grade classes.

Plan staff were not involved in observing or advising multi-grade teachers. Teachers reported that Plan staff never formally observed classes, and that their visits were more focused on administrative matters, such as distribution of materials or monitoring construction.

VEDC members had only limited involvement in schools. The role of the VEDC members appeared to be more in terms of material support, particularly repairs. While those interviewed were aware of the existence of multi-grade classes in the schools, they tended to regard this as a 'second rate' necessity

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34 Also refer to Section 7. Recommendations, for a specific recommendation related to revision of training materials.
due to the lack of teachers, and several requested additional teachers in order to be able to eliminate the need for multi-grade classes.

- **Joint school cluster activities appear limited or non-existent.** While this was not explored in any depth during the study, none of the multi-grade teachers interviewed reported being involved in any joint support activities with teachers from other schools.

In all schools visited, teachers and principals requested that PAs visit the schools more often. They said that visits should involve more in-depth observation and feedback as well as demonstration teaching. However, given the fact that most PAs have not received training in multi-grade teaching, this may not be a realistic option at present.

**c) Teaching and Learning in Multi-grade Classes:**

In each sample school visited, one - two multi-grade classes were observed for periods of 30 - 45 minutes each. Grouping of grades in the classes observed varied, with most having two grades in the same classroom and one of the observed classes with three grades. An observation form was used which included classroom environment - i.e. seating arrangements, lesson planning, methodologies used, use of teaching aids, level of interaction between teacher and students and students and students, types of questions used by the teacher (i.e. open or closed), provision of opportunities for students to speak and express their views, and other aspects. In addition, transition and repetition rates for multi-grade classes compared to single grade classes were also examined for possible differences in terms of student learning outcomes.

**Overall approach:** In all classes observed, teachers were teaching different grades separately, though in some classes there were attempts at some combined activities. For example, in one class observed, the teacher started the class with students from both grades singing a song together. Other teachers reported that they sometimes had both grades do the same activity, as in handicrafts or art, but most of the time different grades studied separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 4. Summary of Views and Suggestions of Children in Multi-Grade Classes - Meung District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children in multi-grade classes said they most like....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Studying Maths and Lao, especially reading and writing (all 6 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asking and answering questions (2 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Extracurricular activities including music and dance (2 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Studying together with friends (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drawing (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things they don’t like....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being disturbed by other students - e.g. fighting in the class (All 6 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher hitting us (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher speaking badly to us (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Studying World Around Us and Maths (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Music (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for improvement....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers should teach better and explain lessons more clearly (2 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School facilities should be improved (2 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers should introduce more games into the lessons (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers should explain more about hygiene (1 school)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments:** Perhaps the main finding from these children’s views that relates to the multi-grade teaching study is that they find it difficult to study in multi-grade classes due to being disturbed by other students. This is consistent with one of the classroom observation findings related to teachers leaving one grade without any work to do while they work with the other grade, especially when starting class. Children also want to see improvements in teaching with clearer explanation of lesson tasks and materials.
Classroom arrangements: In five of the six sample schools visited, it was found that different grades in the same room were seated separately, facing in opposite directions, with blackboards arranged accordingly. While students within a grade were able to form groups by those in front turning around and facing those in the row behind, having grades facing in opposite directions makes it less likely that the teacher will include joint activities in their lessons. Most classrooms had student’s work displayed.

Lesson Planning: All of the multi-grade teachers interviewed were able to show lesson plans that they had developed with plans for two or three grades generally recorded in one book (though they were separate grade lesson plans). In three of the schools, teachers always did lesson planning, in two schools they did lesson plans, but not regularly, and in one school, one teacher always prepared lesson plans while the other did also, but not regularly. Teachers trained as part of the Programme (teachers in five of the six schools visited had received training in multi-grade teaching supported by Plan) were using the format introduced in the training and they reported that this was one of the changes in the teaching as a result of the workshop.

Methodology: In all multi-grade classes where teachers were observed for 30 minutes to one hour, the main method of teaching was teacher centred, with teachers tending to remain mostly in front of the class. Teachers tended to talk most of the time, and questions to students were often closed (e.g. “The answer is three, right?”) rather than encouraging students to think and express their own answers.

While the methodology used in all multi-grade classes observed was largely teacher centred, teachers in most classes observed did have students work in groups at some point, though within their own grades. However, with the exception of one class observed, teachers did not provide much support to students while they were working in groups. After assigning a task – e.g. an activity from the textbook – and asking students to form groups, they were then left to work on the task without further support from the teacher who remained at the front of the class.

In terms of managing several classes at the same time, in all classes observed, the teacher started to teach a lesson with the lower grade first while the other grade(s) waited, often for 10 minutes or more, for the teacher to assign some work for them. In one class involving three grades in the same room, students in the last grade had to wait for 20 minutes without any activities being assigned, while the teacher started teaching each of the other two grades in the same room. This meant that although students were in the classroom, the time for learning was significantly reduced due to waiting for the teacher.

Learning Outcomes: From the data available, it was not possible to distinguish any difference in learning outcomes that may be linked to multi-grade classes. The study gathered data on repetition rates as it was felt that differences in repetition rates could have provided an indicator of students learning outcomes between different classes. However, it was not possible to discern any differences between rates in multi-grade and mono-grade classes. Repetition tends to occur in early grades regardless of the type of class, and appears to have more to do with first language issues.

6.3 Pak Tha District
6.3.1 Background

Of the 36 primary schools in Pak Tha, 31 had multi-grade classes in the 2011/2012 school year. Of these 31 schools with multi-grade classes, 26 had two multi-grade classes in their schools. A total of 53
teachers from these schools received training in multi-grade teaching in 2012 supported by Plan. This was in the form of three day workshops given twice by the trainers from the DESB in Pak Tha District, without any support from PESS trainers.

The study involved a sample of six schools or 19% of the multi-grade schools in Pak Tha District. As in Meung District, the sample included a variety of schools in terms of multi-grade classes, SoQ/non-SoQ, distance from the town, and ethnicity.

**Table 6. Sample School Details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Multi-grade Classes</th>
<th>Predominant Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Distance from District Town</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houay Soua</td>
<td>Grades 1 + 2</td>
<td>Mon-Khmer</td>
<td>9 km</td>
<td>MGT trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donemixay</td>
<td>Grades 1+2 Grades 3+4</td>
<td>Mon-Khmer</td>
<td>4 km</td>
<td>Target SoQ, MGT Trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houy Thong</td>
<td>Grades 2+3 Grades 4+5</td>
<td>Mon-Khmer</td>
<td>4 km</td>
<td>Target SoQ, MGT Trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houay Lamphene</td>
<td>Grades 1+3 Grades 4+5</td>
<td>Hmong-i-Mien Mon-Khmer</td>
<td>11 km</td>
<td>MGT trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houay Phalam</td>
<td>Grades 1+2 Grades 3+4</td>
<td>Mon-Khmer</td>
<td>21 km</td>
<td>MGT trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Thong</td>
<td>Grades 1 + 2 Grades 3 + 4 + 5</td>
<td>Lao Tai and Hmong-i-Mien</td>
<td>2 km</td>
<td>MGT Trained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**6.3.2 Findings**

As in Meung District, the study focussed on 3 main areas:

a) Training provided in multi-grade training, supported by Plan;
b) Follow-up support following training,
c) Multi-grade teaching practices being used in the sample schools.

The findings for each of these areas is covered separately below.

**a) Training:**

All multi-grade teachers who were interviewed in the six sample schools in Pak Tha District had received training in 2012. All had attended a three day multi-grade teacher training workshop organized by DESB trainers with support from Plan. The teachers who were interviewed all said that they found it useful, particularly in terms of learning more about lesson planning and being introduced to some activities they could use with their students, and that they understood most of what was taught. However, they all felt the training could be improved and had a number of specific suggestions as to how this could be done, including:

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35 With the same workshop run twice for different teachers.
36 Although several villages were not far in terms of distance, they had to be accessed by boat.
37 Though most were in Mon-Khmer communities, reflecting the ethnic makeup of the District.
38 Unlike in Meung District, both workshops were of three days duration, and were held in village schools, with participants staying with villagers.
• **More time needed for practice teaching:** All teachers interviewed said they found the three days allocated for the training to be insufficient, and that future training should be extended to five days. More time needs to be allocated to practice teaching, to enable all teachers being trained to try out what they have learned, observed and supported by the trainers and their peers.

• **Hold training in the District town rather than in the village:** Most of those interviewed said that holding the workshop in the village was not really suitable, especially in terms of accommodation (they stayed with families in the village) as well as the training venue. They proposed that future training be held in the District town.

• **More materials for participants:** The lack of handouts or a teacher’s guide for multi-grade teaching was also seen as something that needed to be improved. Only a small number of handouts were provided, and participants had to rely on notes they had taken in the workshop. It was proposed that more reference materials be provided for future training in multi-grade teaching, including the provision of more sample lesson plans.

• **Train all teachers in multi-grade teaching:** Several teachers interviewed felt that all primary school teachers in the District should be trained in multi-grade teaching, including those currently teaching mono-grade classes, as teachers are often reassigned and many current mono-grade teachers may find themselves teaching a multi-grade class in the future. While this is commendable as a long term goal, this study is suggesting a more targeted and phased approach to future training in multi-grade teaching (refer to Section 9. Recommendations).

**b) Follow-up support after training:** The findings in Pak Tha District were very similar to those from Meung District in terms of the level and quality of follow-up support after training. Multi-grade teachers were asked about the support they received after the training from their school principals, fellow teachers, PAs and others, and at least one PA was interviewed. Findings were as follows:

• **All sample school principals in sample schools visited were supporting multi-grade teachers:** In all of the sample schools visited, teachers and school principals reported that principals provide them with help in teaching multi-grade classes as time allowed. Assistance provided included help with lesson planning, informal observation and feedback, and teaching support, especially with Maths. As in most small schools in the Lao PDR, the fact that principals are also teachers themselves, often of multi-grade classes, limits the time they can allocate for this.

• **Pedagogical Advisors visit multi-grade classes two – four times per year.** In three of the sample schools, teachers reported two visits per year, while in the other three schools, teachers said the PAs visited their classrooms three – four times per year. Teachers and principals reported that on these visits, PAs observe their multi-grade classes and give feedback and advice during these visits. However, as in Meung District, it appears that the PAs did not specifically follow up on the multi-grade training to support teachers in the classroom. While there is a classroom observation checklist as one of the DESB monitoring tools, this is not specifically designed for multi-grade classes.

• **Plan education staff not involved in supporting multi-grade teaching:** Both teachers and principals reported that Plan staff never formally observed classes, and that their visits were more focussed on administrative matters, such as distribution of materials or monitoring construction.

• **VEDC members had only limited involvement in schools.** As in Meung District, the role of the VEDC members appeared to be more in terms of material support for the school, particularly repairs.
Also, several requested additional teachers in order to be able to eliminate the need for multi-grade classes.

- **Joint school cluster activities appear limited or non-existent.** None of the multi-grade teachers interviewed reported being involved in any joint support activities with teachers from other schools.

In all schools visited, teachers and principals requested more frequent visits by PAs, with more in-depth observation and feedback as well as demonstration teaching. However, given the fact that most PAs have not received training in multi-grade teaching, and do not have specific skills in this area, the quality of support they can provide is limited.

**c) Teaching and Learning in Multi-grade Classes:**

As in Meung District, in each sample school visited, at least one multi-grade class was observed for periods of 30 - 45 minutes per class. Overall, four grades one and two multi-grade classes were observed, and two grades four and five classes. An observation form was used which included classroom environment, seating arrangements, lesson planning, methodologies used, use of teaching aids, level of interaction between teacher and students and students and students, types of questions used by the teacher (i.e. open or closed), provision of opportunities for students to speak and express their views, and other aspects. In addition, transition and repetition rates for multi-grade classes compared to single grade classes in the sample schools visited were also examined for possible differences between multi-grade and mono-grade classes in terms of student learning outcomes.

**Overall approach:** In all classes observed, teachers were found to be teaching different grades separately, though in some classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children in multi-grade classes said they most like....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Extracurricular activities including music, art and dance (6 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Studying Maths and Lao (3 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Studying World Around Us (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Studying together in groups (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When the teacher explains the lesson clearly (1 school)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things they don't like....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Being disturbed by other students - e.g. fighting in the class (4 schools)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher speaks too fast (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher doesn't help after giving us an activity (1 school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher doesn't explain clearly (1 school)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions for improvement....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Teachers should teach better (2 schools)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Teacher should explain lessons more clearly (2 schools)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- School should be cleaner (1 school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Teachers should lead extra-curricular activities (1 school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Plan should provide more sports equipment and teaching-learning materials (1 school)</td>
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| Comments: As in Meung District, feedback from a sample of students indicates that most students in multi-grade classes experience being disturbed by other students. Their comments also highlight problems with the quality of teaching, with teachers not explaining lessons clearly and not helping students while they are trying to do lessons or activities. This is consistent with the classroom observation findings related to teachers leaving one grade without any work to do while they work with the other grade, especially when starting class. Children also want to see improvements in teaching with clearer explanation of lesson tasks and material. |
there were attempts at some combined activities. For example, in one class observed, the teacher started the class with students from both grades singing a song together.\textsuperscript{39} Other teachers reported that they sometimes had both grades do the same activity, for example in handicrafts or art, and sometimes one teacher said they would ask students from higher grades to help students in lower grades, especially with maths, but most of the time different grades studied completely separately.

\textit{Classroom arrangements:} In four of the six sample schools visited, it was found that different grades in the same room were seated separately, facing in the same direction, with two blackboards at the front of the class. Only in two classes were different grades seated facing in opposite directions, with blackboards arranged accordingly. Most classrooms had at least some student’s work displayed.

\textit{Lesson Planning:} All of the multi-grade teachers interviewed were able to show lesson plans that they had developed for two or more grades recorded in one book. In four of the schools visited, teachers always did lesson planning, while in two schools they prepared lesson plans, but not always regularly. All of the teachers interviewed were using the format introduced in the training and they reported that this was one of the main changes in the teaching as a result of the workshop.

\textit{Methodology:} In five of the six multi-grade classes where teachers were observed for 30 minutes to one hour, the methodology used was mostly teacher centred, with teachers tending to remain mostly in front of the class. Teachers tended to talk most of the time, and questions to students were usually closed rather than encouraging students to express their own answers.

While the methodology used in all multi-grade classes observed was largely teacher centred, teachers in most classes observed did have students work in groups at some point, though within their own grades. However, with the exception of one class observed,\textsuperscript{40} teachers did not provide much support to students while they were working in groups. After assigning the task and asking students to form groups, they were then left to work on the task without further support from the teacher who remained at the front of the class.

As in Meung District, five out of six teachers observed started to teach a lesson with the lower grade first while students in the other grade(s) waited for 10 – 15 minutes for the teacher to assign some work for them. This meant that although students were in the classroom, the time for learning was significantly reduced due to waiting for the teacher.

\textit{Learning Outcomes:} From the school level data available, it was not possible to distinguish any differences in learning outcomes between multi-grade and monograde classes through looking at repetition rates. Repetition rates tended to be low in all the schools visited in Pak Tha District, with usually only a small number repeating lower grades.

\textit{Challenges in the classroom:} Teachers in multi-grade classes faced a number of challenges and in Pak Tha District, this was particularly the case for early grades. As in Meung District, many children start the first grade not being able to speak, read or write Lao, and this makes the work of a multi-grade teacher teaching grades one and two particularly difficult.

\textsuperscript{39} This was also observed in a class in Meung District.

\textsuperscript{40} In one class in Phone Thong school, the teacher moved around among the students working in groups, providing clarification and support.
In addition, it was found in two schools visited in Pak Tha that there were a significant number of underage children in first grade, which further impacted on the quality of teaching and learning, as children were still in the process of adjusting to 'school culture'. In one school at least, the large number of underage children was due to the fact that there was no pre-school or hong giam, but parents left their under five years old children at the school anyway, where they joined the first grade class.

6.4 Conclusions – Meung and Pak Tha Districts

Overall, the picture of the training provided in 2012 as well as multi-grade teaching in both districts that emerges from the study shows that:

- **Training in multi-grade teaching was constrained by a lack of handouts or a teacher’s guide, limited time and limited experience in multi-grade teaching on the part of the trainers:** While the training supported by Plan in 2012 appears to have provided a useful introduction to teaching multi-grade classes, it is clear from both the responses of the teachers who participated, as well as from the trainers themselves, that the quality of the training needs to be improved. The trainers themselves need more training in how to effectively train multi-grade teachers, particularly as most of them have not received any training in this themselves. More time needs to be allocated for practice teaching, and trainers need to demonstrate multi-grade teaching techniques rather than only explaining them. Training would also benefit from the provision of more reference materials in the form of a resource manual or handouts for teachers.

- **Follow-up and support for multi-grade teachers after training was not done systematically:** While all teachers reported being visited by a PA at least twice in the past year, this does not seem to have been clearly linked to the training. For example, no follow up plan was made with teachers during the multi-grade training, and no observation form for multi-grade classes was developed or used. While several teachers said they would like PAs to also demonstrate effective multi-grade techniques when they visit classes, the PAs themselves have limited knowledge and skills in multi-grade teaching.

- **Training in multi-grade teaching has had some positive impact, particularly in terms of lesson planning:** It is clear that the training in multi-grade teaching delivered by DESB and PESS trainers supported by Plan has had some positive effect, particularly in terms of lesson planning (i.e. teachers are now doing lesson plans much of the time, using the format provided as part of the training) as well as introducing a greater variety of activities for students in their classes. Teachers are also using teaching aids, many of which they have produced themselves using materials provided by Plan and FTI. However, it is clear that this initial training has not yet brought any significant improvements in the way multi-grade classes are taught.

- **Different grades are seated and taught largely separately:** Whether there were two or three grades in the same class, they were seated separately and taught mostly separately. The arrangement of the seating also appeared to influence the extent to which teachers would try a combined activity, such as a song. In seven schools visited, where observed grades were facing in different directions, there

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41While PAs have a classroom observation checklist from MoES (as part of monitoring under SoQ), this does not specifically focus on multi-grade classes and would appear to be seldom used in practice.
appeared to be no combined activities, whereas in the 5 classes observed where different grades were facing the same way, this seemed much more likely to happen.

- **Students spend too much time waiting for the teacher:** In 11 of the 12 schools visited, teachers started their lesson with the lower grade first, without assigning any work to the other grade that was waiting for the teacher. This meant that sometimes students in the upper grade were waiting up to 15 or even in one case, 20 minutes for the teacher to assign them some work.

- **Multi-grade teaching is largely teacher centred:** Teachers tend to dominate and do most of the talking in class. Most, but not all of the teachers observed, tended to spend more time standing in front of the class than moving around among the students. While they have learned how to get students working in groups, and students understand how to form groups, most did not appear to know how to support students when they are working in groups in order to ensure maximum benefit. This observation was supported by feedback from children, several of whom said their teachers did not explain lessons clearly and did not help them when they were doing activities in the class.

- **Students are disturbed by other students in multi-grade classes:** Most students who provided feedback for the multi-grade teaching study said that this was something they did not like about their class. While there was no comparison made with students in mono-grade classes, given the larger number of students commonly found in multi-grade classes, as well as the fact that teachers tended to leave students from one grade sitting idle while they worked with the other grade, the level of disturbance in multi-grade classes is likely to be higher than in mono-grade classes.

### 6.5 Other Findings

In addition to the above findings related directly to multi-grade teaching, the study also made some unexpected discoveries which relate in some way to multi-grade teaching. These include the accuracy of EMIS data, the use of reading books provided by Plan, and the role of Plan District Education Coordinators.

#### 6.5.1 EMIS

As well as interviewing teachers, school heads, children and VEDC members and observing classes, the study also collected secondary data related to enrolments, repetition and dropout rates, and teacher qualifications. However, when the data from sample schools in both districts was compared with the data for that school available in EMIS from the DESB, it was found that there were differences, particularly in enrolment, repetition and drop out numbers. This suggests that further improvements to the collection and storage of school data under EMIS still needs improvement.

#### 6.5.2 Reading books

In most of the schools visited, the reading books provided by Plan were either not being used at all or only occasionally. The lack of systematic storage of these books was also a concern in several schools. These books have the potential to enrich multi-grade classes and could for example, provide a means to keep one class busy focused on reading while the other class is taught. Ways in which these reading books could be integrated into multi-grade classes would benefit from further exploration and could be included as a topic in future training.
6.5.3 Role of Plan District Education Coordinators

Plan Education Coordinators in each district appear to have only played a minimal role in both multi-grade teaching training provision and post-training follow-up and support. While the Coordinators face the double constraint of a significant administrative workload (e.g. provision of materials, reporting, etc.) as well as not having an academic background in education, their increased involvement in both the training and follow-up would support the PAs and contribute to positive changes in multi-grade classes.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The above findings, as well as lessons learned from multi-grade teaching situations in other countries, suggest ways in which future initiatives related to multi-grade teacher training might be enhanced in terms of quality. These recommendations include:

*That a decision needs to be made first regarding what approach to multi-grade teaching is to be promoted in Bokeo.* As was discussed earlier in this report, there are a number of approaches which are termed 'multi-grade', from teaching two or more grades completely separately in the same room to merging grades. Given the realities of the Lao context – e.g. poor infrastructure, limited teaching and learning resources, and a history of teaching multi-grades as separate classes, it is recommended that the focus for now should be on improving what is being done already – i.e. ensuring that teachers are able to teach different grades in the same room effectively, with an emphasis on expanding the number of combined activities involving all grades that are in the same classroom. This can be done through providing practical examples during training (see recommendation below) - for example, by demonstrating a combined activity involving two grades, as well as providing sample lesson plans to accompany this.

*That previous multi-grade teaching materials developed in the Lao PDR are reviewed, as well as lessons learned from multi-grade teacher training in other countries, and adapt what might be most useful to expand on the current module and SoQ materials.* Ideally, this process will involve not only relevant Plan and MoES staff, but also others from other organisations that are currently supporting multi-grade teaching in the Lao PDR. The existing core module and SoQ materials could form the foundation for developing an enhanced multi-grade teacher training curriculum which has a stronger focus on practical techniques that can be used in multi-grade classrooms, and which can be used for future training in Bokeo. This enhanced training module should try to address weaknesses observed at classroom level as part of this study – e.g. ensuring all grades are doing activities from the beginning of class (rather than some having to wait for the teacher to come to them), ensuring different grades are seated facing the same direction, reducing excessive teacher talk and use of closed question forms, more teacher support for students doing group work, increasing the number of combined activities across grades, etc. The proposed establishment of a Basic Education Technical Working Group in Vientiane may provide the mechanism for this review of multi-grade teacher training and module revision.

*That Plan supports a ToT for teacher trainers in multi-grade teaching.* The study found that neither the PESS nor DESB trainers had received any training in the past few years in how to train teachers in multi-grade teaching, with most DESB trainers in the three target districts having received

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42 Reportedly under discussion by MoES and Development Partners in Vientiane in 2012.
none at all. Accordingly, it is seen as essential that they receive training themselves before provision of any further training in target districts in Bokeo. Including Plan District Education Coordinators in that ToT may also help them to better support the PAs and teachers in target schools. Master trainers from MoES would conduct the ToT, but may need some external technical support in preparing for, and conducting the workshop.

**That future training in multi-grade teaching for teachers in target districts is introduced in a phased manner, with a focus on quality rather than quantity.** The training provided in 2012 aimed at reaching all multi-grade teachers in all three target districts. While this has ensured that most multi-grade teachers have now received some basic training in multi-grade teaching, a more phased approach is needed for future training.

Accordingly, it is suggested that the first training using the revised module be focussed on teachers in a smaller number of schools, rather than trying to cover all multi-grade teachers in each District. Selection of these schools will need further discussion between Plan and the respective DESBs, and may include target Schools of Quality, in order to build on other additional support already provided to these schools in terms of training and materials, and/or schools in poorer communities that Plan would like to focus on. Selection of a smaller number of schools (teachers from either SoQ or poorer schools or a combination of both) for initial training and quality follow-up support after training will enable these to become models later when improved multi-grade training is provided to teachers from other schools. In addition, Plan needs to get an undertaking that teachers who will be trained will not be moved from their multi-grade classes for at least two - three years.43

It is also suggested that the focus for 2013 be on improving multi-grade training and teaching in this smaller number of schools - approximately 15 schools per target district - with extension to other schools scheduled for 2014. It is also essential that all PAs responsible for monitoring and supporting teachers in these schools also participate in the training, together with Plan education staff, so that they will be better equipped to provide the kind of support that teachers already trained are requesting from DESB.

**That more time is allocated in future training to practice teaching.** Most of the multi-grade teacher training workshops held in 2012 were three days in duration, which did not allow sufficient time for practice teaching by the participants. Also, the practice teaching that was done appears not to have been done systematically, in that those observing the practice teaching were not given any kind of observation checklist and thus feedback seems to have been done informally rather than in a more structured way. Development of a multi-grade class observation checklist, based on the existing MoES checklist, as recommended below, could then be used to observe practice teaching as well as for follow-up observation after the training.

**That follow-up support for teachers trained in multi-grade teaching is planned from the outset.** This was an area found to be lacking in 2012, as there was no specific attention given to following up the multi-grade teacher training and ensuring appropriate post-training support. It is recommended that a follow-up plan and schedule be developed by teachers, school principals and PAs during the multi-grade teacher training so that teachers trained will know what kind of support they can expect. The class

43 This is particularly important in Meung District, where teachers are frequently transferred after only a year or 2 in a particular school.
observation form that currently exists needs to be adapted to take into account multi-grade teaching situations. This can be used during the practice teaching component of the multi-grade training as well as by PAs when they visit teachers and observe their classes after training (with the added advantage that teachers will already be familiar with the observation checklist as they will have used it themselves during the practice teaching component of the training).

**That a short mini-workshop on effective ways of observing and giving support be conducted by trainers for PAs, and school principals.** A short (half to one day) workshop needs to be organised for PAs and school principals in how to more effectively observe, provide feedback and support to multi-grade teachers after training. This would include providing demonstration teaching, something specifically requested by several teachers but which PAs and school principals have been unable to provide due to their own limited experience in multi-grade teaching.

**That special attention is given to ways in which reading books already provided by Plan could be better integrated into multi-grade classes.** As was found in the mid-term review in 2011, the use of reading books provided by Plan to each school has not been optimised. While a small number of the sample schools in the study were using the books (i.e. they allocated time for students to borrow books for reading), most were either making only limited use of these books or were not using them at all. Identifying ways in which these books might be used effectively in multi-grade classes should be one of the areas of specific focus of the next multi-grade teacher training.

**That particular attention be given to helping DESB in each of the three target districts to improve the accuracy of the data they collect from schools.** As the study found, data on enrolments, and numbers of students repeating classes or dropping out collected from schools was usually different from the numbers collected by DESB for EMIS for the same school year. This suggests that improvements need to be made in terms of data accuracy. It is suggested that the form used to collect this quantitative data as part of the study be adapted and used to collect data regularly from schools participating in the next round of multi-grade teacher training, and that this data then provided to DESB so that they can adjust their EMIS data to ensure greater accuracy.

### 8. CONCLUSIONS

The picture of multi-grade teaching in the two target districts that has emerged from the study shows that while the training provided in 2012 provided a good foundation in terms of level of understanding, lesson planning and some useful activities for multi-grade classes, it did not equip teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to teach multi-grade classes effectively. The classroom observations revealed that teachers are still struggling with multi-grade teaching and would benefit from better quality training and more effective follow-up after training.

In terms of approach, given the realities of the Lao context, it would seem to make more sense to focus on improving and further developing what teachers are trying to do now – which is teach different grades in the same room largely separately – rather than trying to introduce an ‘ideal’ multi-grade model of combined grades from the outset. At the same time, while supporting teachers to do what they are doing now more effectively, efforts need to be made to move the approach being used closer to this ideal, through introducing practical ways in which two or three grades in the same classroom can be combined for some activities which go beyond occasional songs, games and handicrafts, including joint lessons from the curriculum.
Most schools in the three target districts in Bokeo Province currently have multi-grade classes and this situation is unlikely to change. Accordingly, it is imperative that much more attention be given to improving the quality of teaching and learning in these situations. While attempts to improve the quality of multi-grade teaching have been made in the past, their legacy has been limited. Taking a practical and low budget approach to improving multi-grade teaching in the three target districts in Bokeo has the potential to have much wider impact beyond Plan target areas, through enhancement of existing training and wider involvement of MoES and Development Partners in the process.