Report on Perceptions and Attitudes towards School in Lao Primary Education in Bokeo Province

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Perceptions and Attitudes towards School in Lao primary education in Bokeo Province

A Study of Pha Oudom District

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Introduction

BACKGROUND

Progress towards universal primary education has accelerated in Lao PDR in recent years. However, school survival is still an important issue with high dropout rates and an overall participation in secondary school standing at below 50%. Although literacy rates are improving, still approximately less than four-fifth of all adults are literate. The prospects for access to and completion of the primary level are closely linked to the conditions of the household. Children from poor families, and especially those from rural and ethnic minorities, face higher risks than others to be excluded from the education system.1

As part of its global campaign “Learn without Fear”, Plan International stresses the need for elimination of violence in schools as a precondition for getting children into school and keeping them there.2 The campaign also targets the need for national legislations regarding corporal punishment, sexual violence and bullying. The development of legislation that protects children from violence in schools is founded on generally acknowledged children’s rights and includes legal documents in the areas mentioned above. The Lao law on Protection of Children’s Rights from 2009, article 27, considers corporal punishment in schools as unlawful, while in relation to bullying there is no specific legislation.

Plan Laos is committed to ensure children’s rights to basic education through its work in three districts in Bokeo Province. The main objectives of its five year program are to increase the rates of access to primary education and survival to Grade 5, to enhance teaching and learning quality as well as the relevance of primary education, and to improve the management and governance of basic education. A further concern is to support the development of school as a safe and stimulating environment. The objectives align with dimensions of the school education quality standards established by MoE3 as well as with the notion of a Child Friendly School.4

The literature on school as a safe learning environment that is free of different forms of violence includes a few regional and in-country studies. These are often part of global initiatives, as for example the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment, and may include campaign document and manuals.5 The violence discussed in these studies mainly concern corporal punishment, bullying and trafficking. Further, studies of this kind have increasingly adopted a child/youth/student perspective, i.e. build on their voices. An example is the comprehensive Cambodian study “This is my story” of children’s perspectives on violence at home and at school.

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2 Plan Learn without fear (2010). Campaign Progress Report
3 MoE (2008). School of Quality Standards
Part of the Cambodian study is a situation analysis reviewing factors that contribute to violence against children. According to the findings, these include poverty, alcohol, divorce, gender, age and geographic location. Girls are more affected than boys; younger children more than older; children who live in border provinces more than those living elsewhere, etc. Similar findings are reported in the study “What children say. Result of a comparative research on the physical and emotional punishment of children in Southeast Asia and the Pacific”.  

A study that has had impact on other studies is the global survey on violence against children carried out on behalf of the UN’s General assembly in 2006. Violence against children was found to be to some extent hidden and unreported. There is often a societal acceptance of violence as a discipline issue. In rural areas, no safe and trusted mechanisms for reporting violence affecting children exist. Some groups of children are specifically vulnerable, such as children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, as well as street children, refugees or displaced children. Factors protecting children from violence include good parenting and positive, non-violent discipline.  

A desk study on discipline and punishment of children, “A rights-based review of laws, attitudes and practices in East Asia and the Pacific”, revealed that corporal punishment of children is considered an acceptable form of discipline in schools. Both children and parents are hesitant to intervene or complain, unless punishment causes serious injury. Children use the same justifications for corporal punishment as the adults who punish them.  

According to the unpublished Lao study on children’s perspective on school as a protective environment, various forms of violence exist in schools, such as children hitting children, children calling each other animal names, teacher beating pupils, and others. In line with results from other international studies, girls are more exposed than boys. Children often accept corporal punishment, when they make mistakes, i.e. as correction method. Children also identified breaks as dangerous times when violence may occur.  

The literature review also found two Lao studies on trafficking. The first one is a joint study by Unicef and the Ministry of Labor and Health from 2004 and second one consists of the critical analysis by Meier written in 2009 of the legal framework in the concerned areas. According to the former study, Laos is particularly vulnerable to trafficking as it is situated in a fast developing region, with a young population, and having relatively low economic indicators. The overwhelming majority of trafficking victims surveyed (60%) were girls aged between 12 and 18 years, most of them ending up in forced prostitution. The majority of cross-border trafficking was related to Thailand, most of the victimized girls coming from rural areas. However, few of the victims came from extremely remote areas or from situations of severe poverty. The study concludes, as a broad generalization, that girls from the Northwestern provinces of Oudomxay, Luang Namtha, Luang Prabang and Bokeo tend to be mostly trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation.

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6 Save the Children (2005). *What children say. Result of a comparative research on the physical and emotional punishment of children in the Southeast Asia and the Pacific*. However, this study does not specifically document the situation in Lao PDR.


The turn in the research on violence against children during last decade to build on children’s/students’ voices has also produced guides on how to include children and youth in research. An example is the report from Save the Children, *So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children’s meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*. In the previously mentioned studies, reference is often given to an early guide by Boyden, J. and Ennew, J. (1997) *Children in focus. A manual for participatory research with children*. Save the Children, Sweden

CONCEPTS USED

Some of concepts used in the present study should be briefly commented upon.

**Drop-out (dropout).** A definition of dropout is a child who has left primary school before finishing the last grade. This definition does not include children who never enroll in school at all. In this study, dropouts refer to all pupils who discontinue schooling in all grades between Grade 1 of primary school and Grade 1 of lower secondary school.

**Out-of-school children.** This is a wider notion encompassing dropouts but also going beyond. Children are considered to be out-of-school if they have no exposure to school during a specific year. They fall into two groups – school-age children who have yet to start school and children who have dropped out before reaching the theoretical completion age for primary education.

**Bullying.** Bullying encompasses physical and/or psychological or emotional abuse by children of other children, adults of children, children of adults and adults of adults. It is usually applied in the context of child to child abuse. Physical abuse includes negative actions such as beating, hitting, slapping, and kicking etc. Psychological/emotional abuse of verbal character includes ridiculing, threatening, rejecting, using harsh language, etc. The concept refers to repeated negative actions of one or more students against another.

**Corporal punishment.** This notion usually refers to adult to child punishment/violence and, in the school context, to teacher to pupils/students corporal punishment. It can include beating, crawling, sitting in the sun, withholding meals, holding desks over the head for a length of period and frog-jumping, but may also comprise non-physical elements connected to such physical ones, for example verbally being singled out, feeling embarrassed when others

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12 Save the Children (2004). *So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children’s meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*


14 Enrolment data could according to UNESCO differ in the following aspects: overstate participation by counting registered children, who never attended school, underestimate by missing children who are in school but never registered; enrolment is counted in the beginning of the school year while some children register late. UNESCO (2005). *Children out of School, Measuring exclusion from primary education.*

15 Lao Women’s Union and Ministry of Education (2007) unpublished. “This is my story”. Children’s’ perspectives on a protective environment in Lao PDR
laugh because of punishment, etc. The definition adopted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child refers to “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.”

Save the Children has defined ‘corporal punishment’ as including a wide range of physical and emotional punishments exercised by adults on children in a variety of settings. It is argued that the translations of the word ‘corporal’ can cause misunderstandings in the East Asia and the Pacific region because ‘corporal punishment’ in many countries is associated with the police and army and with the penal system. People do not in general associate it with homes and schools. The basic element in the word “corporal” is ‘corps’, ‘body’. A possibly more useful, as well as universal, term in English would be ‘physical’. Emotional punishment – sometimes called ‘psychological’ or ‘humiliating’ – is integral to this definition. It is further argued that the context of corporal punishment is different for children and adults. While punishment of adults is most likely to occur in the form of (often illegal) penalties for crimes given for example by the police, punishment of children is normally associated with the idea of discipline and may in some countries be perceived as a normal component of family education.

**Discipline.** This word is normally directly related to the status of ‘child’. In its most general sense, it refers to the process by which children learn societal and cultural attitudes, values and behaviors, and does not necessarily include any kind of punishment. However, the word normally suggests an organized transmission of such values that include sanctions of some kind, i.e. behavior that is not wished for leads to a sanction. This seems to be the meaning of the word as it is expressed in the idea of “positive discipline” according to which the desired behavior of school children should be encouraged by “positive” reinforcements and not-desired behavior should be discouraged by sanctions that are as little “negative” in character as possible and that exclude any kind of corporal punishment.

**Violence.** Violence has been defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child by an individual or group that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity.” In this report, the word normally is used in this sense. However, it should be observed that violence often exists without being intentional. For example, the school environment may repress children’s thoughts; will of expression and culture without teachers necessarily being consciously aware of this.

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16 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 8, para. 11
17 Save the Children (2005) Discipline and punishment of children: a rights-based review of laws, attitudes and practices in East Asia and the Pacific
18 Ibid.
OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are to

- analyze primary school students’ and their families’ experiences, attitudes and perceptions of schooling and education in general and of the local school in particular
- identify mechanisms that lead to drop out from school
- assess the quality and relevance of teaching and learning in primary education, as well as its impact on children’s and families’ attitudes towards education
- review the school environment as a safe place for children’s learning
- make recommendations for practical approaches that may enhance the quality of teaching, as well as school as a physical and social environment for safe learning
- make recommendations that may guide Plan Laos’ program for school support

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Focusing on the role of primary education in three different social contexts in Pha Oudom district in the Northern province of Bokeo, the study is mainly qualitative in nature. Field work was carried out in the rural village of Lung, in the semi-rural village of Homsouk and in the two villages constituting the central part of the district capital of Pha Oudom. After completing field work in Pha Oudom and Lung, it became clear that the inclusion of the fourth village in which field work was planned to take place, the Hmong village of Hangdoy, would not add to the significance of the study, and the visit to the village was limited to one day of lesson observations and interviews with the two village chiefs, the acting principal and one teacher. Along a center-periphery and (semi)urban-rural dimension, central Pha Oudom and Lung respectively represent the extremes. Comprising Lao Loum, Khmou and Lameth ethnic groups, the three areas of field work also capture ethnic differences.

The instruments for data collection comprise lesson and school observations, conversations and semi-structured interviews, sessions or conversations with pupils, gathering of statistical data on school enrollment and document reading.

Lesson and school observations

Lesson observations focused primarily on the nature of communication and interaction in the classroom, but also targeted the organization and sequencing of activities as well as the use of time, the textbook and the blackboard. As for communicative patterns, observations addressed various dimensions of teachers’ and pupils’ language use (open/closed questions; individual/collective questions; pupils’ initiatives; verbal negotiations between teacher and pupils or between pupils; the length and complexity of pupils’ interventions, etc.). Most observed lesson lasted around 90 minutes. Each observation resulted in a rough ethnographic account of activities from the first minute to the last (running record) and an analytic

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20 The following formulation of the objectives is not identical with, but entirely congruent to the ones found in the Terms of reference for the study.
description of the lesson along the dimensions indicated above. Since language use and communicative patterns were a main concern, the subjects “Lao Language” and “The World Around Us” were given priority. Out of 19 observations, 14 were made in Grade 5, although some in multi-grade classrooms. The remaining 5 observations concerned Grades 2, 3 and 4. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 19 whole lessons included in the analysis of teaching and learning. In addition to these 19 lessons, field work comprised observations, varying in length between 10 to 40 minutes, of parts of another 6 lessons. Furthermore, with classrooms that were normally open for insight from outside, teachers’ and pupils behavior could be observed while walking around in the schools or making interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Lao Language</th>
<th>The World Around US</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pha Oudom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homsook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hangdoy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lung</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations also targeted the physical and psychological environment of the visited schools and classrooms. The aspects focused on were based on the SoQ referred to in the previous report from Bokeo Province in the context of Child Friendly Schools.\(^21\)

**Interviews**

In all three schools, as well as in Hangdoy primary school, interviews were made with the Principal and with the Grade 5 teachers (in Pha Oudom Primary School the principal was also teaching in one of the Grade 5 classes), in all eight interviews. In addition, informal conversations were held with several other teachers. Normally lasting one hour or a bit more, teacher interviews focused on the interviewee’s background, training and professional experience, view on teaching and experiences of difficulties in the classroom practice. Also, teachers’ views on in-service training and on “modern teaching” were discussed, as well as their experiences of and attitudes towards discipline and punishments.

Conducted during weekends or in the evenings, parent interviews normally took place in the home of the interviewee. In Pha Oudom 7 interviews were made, compared to 3 in Lung and 4 in Homsook. In most of these interviews, several family members participated and at times also one or two neighbors. Further, the team met and discussed with Education Development Committees and village chiefs. In Lung, several additional conversations were held with villagers. Moreover, two interviews were made with Grade 5 leavers who had not continued to secondary school after finishing Grade 5. Family interviews focused on the economic, educational, cultural and educational resources of all household members and of close relatives in the extended family and on the experience of and expectancies in relation to education. Also, parents were asked about their view and experience of punishment and violence related to school and schooling. Interviews normally lasted an hour and a half, sometimes less and sometimes more.

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\(^21\) The *Research Report on Teaching Practice and Learning Outcome in Grade 3 in Bokeo Province* (p. 31ff) comprises a useful account of quality level indicators for Bokeo schools.
School class mapping and conversations with pupils

In Grade 5, much time was spent with pupils. In a first step, an attempt to map out the background and school performance of each pupil was made. After dividing the class in two halves, information was gathered from the pupils on the profession, educational and literacy level of the two parents, and assets existing in the household (electricity, television, motorbike, toktok, etc.). This information was supplemented by an assessment from the teacher of each individual pupil’s academic performance and chances to continue to lower secondary education. In a second step, still working with half the class or with girls and boys separately, conversations were held on schooling; work before and after school and future prospects as well as on sensitive topics such as punishments, bullying and violence.

Statistical data

In order to get a clear view of enrollment and dropout, school statistics were collected at all three schools. These consist of a small Ministry of Education booklet that is yearly filled with numbers at school level and handed in to the DEB, which sends the same data to the PES at provincial level and further to the Ministry of Education. This information comprises enrollment for each grade per sex and language group. It also includes the age distribution per sex in each grade. For lower secondary schools, data on enrollment was collected through visits to the concerned schools. The schools provided enrollment data by sex and language group for students originating from the primary schools targeted in the study.

Using this data, a fairly exact calculation of enrollment, transition rates and dropout rates was possible (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). In order to estimate the survival rate of Grade 1-beginners, the number of pupils enrolling in Grade 2 in a specific year (e.g. 2011/2012) was divided by the number of pupils who enrolled in Grade 1 the preceding year by sex and language group. **Example:** if 24 girls enrolled in Grade 2 in Lung Primary School in 2010/11, while 37 girls enrolled in Grade 1 in 2009/10, then the survival rate would be 24 divided by 37, i.e. 65 percent.²²

In order to reduce the effect of fluctuations between years, the enrollment figures for two subsequent years were added to each other. **Example:** the sum of the number of girls who enrolled in Grade 2 in 2010/11 and 2011/12 were divided by the sum of the number of girls enrolling in Grade 1 in 2009/10 and 2010/11. The same calculation was made for grades 3 to 5 and for grade 1 of lower secondary school.²³

²² Since available school data did not include information on repeaters that made it impossible to separate them from newcomers from a lower grade, repeaters are included in the calculation. As an effect, the calculated survival rate becomes higher than the real one, i.e. the rates presented in figures 1, 2 and 3 give a more positive picture of school survival than the picture that would have been obtained if repeaters were included. If we consider the given example, the 24 girls enrolled in Grade 2 in 2010/11 are most likely to include an unknown number of repeaters. These repeaters were not girls who enrolled in and transited from Grade 1 in the preceding year, i.e. 2009/10, but girls who enrolled in Grade 1 either two or three years back. If we keep the numbers in the example and assume that 3 of the 24 girls in Grade 2 in 2011/12 were repeaters and exclude them from the calculation, then the survival rate would be calculated as (24-3) divided by 37, i.e. 57 percent. If school statistics had comprised yearly data on repeaters for all grades, which they do not, then repeaters could have been separated from other pupils in the calculation, thus lowering the survival rates presented in the figures 1, 2 and 3. However, one should remember that even if repeaters are more likely to drop out from school at a later stage than non-repeaters, some of them do make it to the end of primary education. In other words, not taking repeaters into account at all would also give a misrepresentation of survival rates.

²³ Survival rates should not be confused neither with promotion rates nor with transition rates. While promotion rates normally refer to the percentage of pupils in a given grade who receive sufficient scores to be able to continue to the next grade, transition rates normally indicate the proportion of pupils in a given grade who after being promoted actually enroll in the next grade the following year. Survival rates refer to the estimated number
Once the survival rate was calculated for each grade (grade 2 up to Grade 1 of lower secondary), this rate (in percent) was applied to the hypothetical enrollment in Grade 1 of 100 pupils for each sex and language group. Example: if 100 girls enroll in Grade 1 in Lung primary school and the transition rate to Grade 2 (survival rate) is 60 percent, then 60 girls remain in Grade 2. If the transition rate to Grade 3 for girls in the same school, calculated in the same way, is 88 percent, the 88 percent out of 60 girls survive until Grade 3, i.e. 57 girls.

It should be observed that the basic principle of comparing enrollment in a specific grade to enrollment in the previous grade in the preceding year does not give justice to the effect of repetition. In reality, a number of pupils in any grade are not beginners in that grade, but repeaters. In order to get a more precise idea of transition, one would need to subtract the estimated number of repeaters in a given grade from the number of enrolled pupils. In other words, the real transition from one grade to the next grade is lower than the calculated survival rates shown in the figures. However, repetition turned out to be very difficult to calculate and the ambition to incorporate repetition in the calculation was abandoned. As a result the survival rates presented in Figures 1 to 3 are higher than they should be.

Moreover, as the interviews confirmed, many pupils drop out in one year and come back some years later. A manifestation of this effect is found in Figure 1 (Lung primary school), where the number of boys in Grade 3 for two subsequent years was higher than the number of boys in Grade 2. In order to compensate for these effects and for the uncertainties of calculating repetition, survival rates were calculated in the way explained above. In reality, survival rates are no doubt lower than the ones presented here.

**Modes of working**

The whole team worked together in each village but with divided responsibilities. A fruitful and necessary collaboration existed with local interpreters (Plan “interns”) who know local languages and were sensitive to cultural and social dimensions of the various local relationships involved, without being themselves direct part of these relationships. The study involved a number of young people, parents, teachers and community developers who gave the team access to personal information, experiences and opinions. This confidence prompts for guaranteeing anonymous participation, coding and safe keeping of data, and a strict adherence to the rules of informed consent and voluntary participation, including the right to at any time refuse to participate. The researchers have respected to the principle for research ethics stated by the Swedish Research Council (www.vr.se, 2007) and in the Council’s report *Good Research Practice – What is it?* (VR 2006:1).
The villages and their schools

Let us first give a short description of the four school settings in which the study took place. Generally speaking, they can be said to situate themselves along the dimension center-periphery, or urban-rural. The parts of central Pha Oudom where children enroll in the Pha Oudom Primary School represent the most urban pole, while Lung village exemplifies a rural one, the Homsouk and Hangdoy villages occupying positions in between. As we shall see, this dimension expresses, above all, differences related to the degree of integration of the family economy into something that can be called a modern sector of society, as well as differences related to the role of education in people’s lives.

LUNG VILLAGE

We will start in the periphery. Lung is a Lameth village at 5 kilometers distance from the larger village of Vangpom situated at the Nam Tha river. Originally coming from a mountainous area, the villagers moved down the mountain in 1979 in a resettlement program joining several small villages into one. However, the first area of resettlement did not offer sufficient land for the need of the village people and in addition many people died from malaria in the new location. In 1986, the village moved again to its present location, now counting 63 households, all Lameth. Benefitting from a Lao Red Cross project, villagers have clean mountain water channeled to 8 different locations in the village. In 2011, electricity reached the village. Since the costs for connecting a house to the electric system are high, so far only 26 of the households have electricity.

All families living out of farming, adults and young children depart to the rice field in early morning, returning only late in the afternoon. While fields in the plain land can be reached in one hour’s time, it may take more than two hours to get to the mountainous rice fields that most families also keep. Land is not equally distributed among villagers, some families owning larger fields in the plain land which rend good harvests and others having smaller and often not so fertile fields. In order to make the year, poorer families may now and then need to work as day-laborers in the fields of richer families. The most common investment in expensive equipment is the small tractor (toktok). In the village, 5 new tractors stand out from the 20 older ones assembled from components of other tractors. While poorer families may share a toktok, wealthy households keep one of their own.

School and education

For preprimary level, Plan Laos has constructed a concrete school building with one class room, beautifully situated at a small hill at the outer margin of the village facing the valley and the mountains. It also serves as a store room for school material. Next to this school house, there are two separate bamboo school buildings comprising three class rooms that are partly used for multi-grade teaching. While Grade 1 is lodged in one of the buildings, a
second class room hosts Grades 2 and 5 and a third one accommodates Grades 3 and 4. Using mud floors, the class rooms have modern blackboards and simple wooden benches where children sit in rows, one grade at one side of the room and another grade at the other. The village hopes to be able to fund new concrete built class rooms at some point in the future. At the side of these school buildings, one of the mountain water wells is situated. In order to facilitate school enrollment, the village currently implements a pilot project in which two village members take care at night of children whose parents need to sleep overnight in the fields. Hopefully, drop out will be reduced in early grades since parents can leave children at home when farming demands that they stay away.

The school counts four teachers, two 11+1 teachers (Thai Dam and Lameth, one of whom is the principal), one 5+3 Lameth teacher and one preschool teacher (Thai Dam and married to the principal). Although one of the teachers and the principal keep a house in the village, constructed by the villagers, they have their homes in the Pha Oudom area and return their most weekends. The school principal also owns a shop in Pha Oudom which needs attention. Recently married into a rather influential family in a village close to Pha Oudom (father-in-law works as a government official), the younger teacher explains that there is a strong family pressure on him to return at weekends in order to work at the family rice fields. Villagers complain that teachers take too long weekends off and claim they often do not return before Mondays evening or Tuesday. In addition, teachers now and then take part of the day off while attending to their own rice fields close to the village or other affairs (they both use day-laborers for assistance). While it is difficult to estimate with any certainty the real teaching time during the school year after a short visit like the one paid to the village, it is likely that at least one third of the time regulated by the curriculum disappears.

Officially recognized as a “literate village”, the village has been subjected to literacy programs offering primary education to adults with little or no schooling from their years in the mountains. Although this program obviously involved many adults, the literacy rate in the village remains uncertain. Interviewed families all claimed they highly valued education and made their best to enroll their children in the village school. While no demographic data permit certain assessment of the rate of school enrolment among school-aged children, the village chairman claims that “all but a few” children enroll in school. Local school statistics testify to a strikingly high repetition rate in Grade 1 (58% of all Grade 1 pupils in 2009/10, 67% in 2010/11 and 57% in 2011/12), followed by a heavy drop out that levels out in Grades 4 and 5. Although figures somewhat differ between the years, an average of approximately 50% of all children that enroll in Grade 1 also reach Grade 5 (Figure 1). 24

The high repetition rate in Grade 1 and the subsequent high dropout rate between grades 1 and 2 are partly explained by the coincidence in time between the period of the school exam and harvest time when families need children to go to the rice fields to work. According to several interviewees, families whose children need to repeat because of missing the school exam in Grade 1, lose faith in the viability of the school education investment and give up schooling.

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24 An explanation of how survival rates were calculated can be found in the description above of the methodological approach.
Figure 1: Calculated survival rate of pupils enrolled in Grade 1 per sex, Lung village

As seen in Figure 1, an attempt was made to calculate the transition to lower secondary school on the basis of data collected at Pakhad Lower Secondary School, where Lung students enroll after finishing Grade 5. Approximately 22 percent of all girls enrolling in Grade 1 survive up to lower secondary, compared to 16 percent of the boys.

Age differences are wide in all grades and especially in Grade 1, where children are between 6 and 12 years old, due to late entry into school and to the many repeaters. The wide age distribution and the sudden increase of boys in Grade 3, show that school-aged children not only often start school late and often repeat, but also often temporarily drop out in order to return a later year. However, there is a tendency that age distribution decreases between the years 2009/2010 and 2011/2012 for which school statistics were analyzed. (For a more detailed discussion of drop out and repetition, see section below on families’ use of education in different social settings in the district.)

HOMSOUK

The inhabitants of the Khmou village of Homsouk moved to their present location 4 kilometers from the center of Pha Oudom from Odomxay province in 1975 at a time when there was good availability of land. However, this is not the case now. A major difficulty for especially the poorer families in the village’s 220 households is that there is no way their economic condition can be improved through increased agricultural production. According to the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC), the rice fields, which are normally
situated within less than hour’s walk from the village, do not rend sufficient harvest for all families. Since the only way to get more land for cultivation is through buying it, this is impossible, one hectare of land selling at a price of approximately 75 million Kip. While there are 25 toktoks in the village, many families rent one for preparing their fields. Poorer families may get extra income through working as day-laborers at the fields of others, although employers always are other, more wealthy, villagers, not outsiders, and payment may come in products. When a poor family needs money, for example for getting rice to eat, this can be provided by an employer who, in return, gets a fixed number of working days in return. Geographically close to the more urban economy of the district capital, villagers at times try to sell products in Pha Oudom. However, this is an economically risky adventure, since transport costs stand at 10.000 Kip for a return ticket and they often come back without having sold the products they bought. The main source of income is from selling rice. Water supply is a major problem in the village, since there are no drilled wells with pumps, forcing villagers to dig their own ones or to keep rain water from the rainy season. Out of 220 households, 130 have been able to afford to connect their houses to the electrical system. In spite of economic difficulties some households obviously succeed reasonably in earning their living. The proximity to the district center of Pha Oudom also means that some village families are close or belong to the small modern sector in the district, being teachers or shop owners. For example, one of the interviewees was an upper-secondary school teacher, and another a retired police officer, educated in Vientiane and who had previously had a rather high position in Houayxay. The village chairman counts to 70 television sets in the village. An expression of the proximity to the more urban economy in the district capital of Pha Oudom, part of which is the main road between the province capital in Houayxay and the district capital, is the relative abundance of motorbikes in the village. According to the village chairman, there are 75 motorbikes in the village, a high number that may be explained by the fact that the village is situated close to the Houayxay-Pha Oudom main road.

School and education

The Homsouk primary school is the center school in a school cluster comprising 9 schools in total. It receives only Khmu speaking children from the village. With a total of 231 pupils in grades 1 to 5 in 2011/2012, the school has one school class in each grade and no multi-grade teaching. In addition, there is a preschool class. Out of 10 teachers, 4 have 11+1 training backgrounds, 5 possess an 8+3 diploma and 1 has a 5+3 exam. Only 2 teachers are male, one of whom is the principal. Being of Khmu origin, he is also the only teacher living in the village. While the school principal claims that no children drop out between Grade 1 and Grade 5, school enrollment figures show differently (Figure 2). One third (28 % for the girls and 29 for the boys) disappear after Grade 1 and roughly 50 percent of all Grade 1 pupils reach Grade 5. Transition from Grade 5 to lower secondary is high compared to the other two schools and 41 out of 100 girls who enroll in Grade 1 entry into lower secondary. For boys the corresponding figures is 45. Most likely, pupils who reach grade 5 are highly selected through the elimination process that makes most pupils drop out in earlier grades, and once they reach the final grade in primary education, their families want them to continue to lower secondary. One positive factor is probably the proximity of the neighboring lower secondary school of Pounglath, which testifies to the importance of geographic access to schools at higher levels for schooling.
CENTRAL PHA OUDOM (PHONEXAY AND PHADOUM VILLAGES)

Pha Oudom district capital consists of four villages, two of whom send school-ages children to the Pha Oudom Primary School. These are the villages of Pha Oudom and Phonexay that host most of the government buildings in the capital, such as the district governor’s office, the District Education Bureau and others. Here, we also find the district hospital and the main market, that is, the center of the capital’s commercial life. The two villages, just as the other two constituting the district capital, are situated along the main road between the province capital of Houayxay, at a distance of 78 kilometers, and the neighboring province capital of Odomxay, 69 kilometers away. As a consequence, the district center is also characterized by the kind of mobility that proximity to transport systems brings. A small number of guest houses and restaurants facing the road offer accommodation to travellers and visitors to district workshops and other activities. In recent years, the offices of the Plan Laos organization have become a center of activity along the main road through the villages. It is also in the center of Pha Oudom that one finds the few offices in the district that represent the most modern parts of Lao society, such as the providers of mobile telephone services.

Land property in the two villages in the center of Pha Oudom is the most expensive in the district. Rice fields in the proximity of the villages are valued at a price of 75 million Kip per hectare, making it impossible for simple farmers to buy. In fact, most land that is recently sold ends up in the hands of richer people, such as merchants, guest-house owners, or city people from Houayxay. The villages being rather well populated, little land is left for house construction in the two villages. Occasional empty land spots may be sold at high prices.
The two villages are dominated by Lao Loum, Khmou and Lameth speaking families, who all normally master Lao Loum as lingua franca. Although a majority of families seem to keep their own rice fields, only some are full time farmers. Many earn their living in the commercial sector as vendors or small shop owners, while others are teachers or work in the government offices. Households tend to comprise many generations and persons, some of whom are relatives to the house owner who come to the district center to study or work. Income differences seem to be large. While some families are wealthy, in a Lao perspective, having high government positions or owning commercial businesses, others may have difficulties to survive economically, earning money from occasional day-labor.

Formal education is by far more spread in central Pha Oudom than in any other part of the district, a considerable amount of families having members with a secondary diploma or even a post-secondary degree. Families in the modern sector, such as primary and secondary teachers, government officials and some of the owners of commercial companies have a history in education. Interviews also confirm that, in general, the extended families comprise more members with a complete primary or lower secondary level than in the other villages targeted in the research. A higher educational diploma seldom comes alone, and normally indicates that a larger number of extended family members have at least primary education.

School and education

Close to the Pha Oudom Primary School, the Pha Oudom Secondary School offers a possibility to continue education at lower and upper secondary levels. In other words, geographical distance is normally not a reason for dropping out after finalizing Grade 5. Consisting of three cement built school houses, one not yet finished, and a bamboo made meeting hall with zinc roof, Pha Oudom Primary School has a kindergarten starting at the age of three, and two parallel school class in each one of the grades 1 to 5. There are 13 teachers, five of whom are men, five with 11+1 diplomas and eight with 8+3 exams. Most teachers live in the close neighborhood. In recent years, teachers have participated in DEB-organized and partly Plan-funded workshops on active learning, positive discipline and creative learning.

As the analysis of school enrollment statistics show (Figure 3), Lao Loum girls and boys continue to Grade 5 to a much higher degree than pupils in the other two schools of Lung and Homsonouk (83% of all Lao Loum girls enrolling in Grade 1 and 87% of all boys). This stands in contrast to minority boys and especially minority girls in the same school. Only 41 percent of the Mon-Kmer speaking girls (i.e. Khmou and Lameth) and 69 percent of the boys reach Grade 5. However, after Grade 5, a strange dropout appears of both majority and minority children, with the exception of Lao Loum girls of whom 61 percent of all Grade 1 beginners reach lower secondary school. For Lao Loum boys, as well as all minority children, boys as girls, very few continue to secondary school, in spite of the fact that the secondary school of Pha Oudom is not far away. In the school year 2011/12, the Pha Oudom Secondary School received a quota of 49 pupils from Pha Oudom Primary School, but managed to enroll only 21 children in Grade 1 of lower secondary. Part of the explanation of this somewhat unexpected drop out of Lao Loum boys after Grade 5 is probably, as in other areas, that poor families do not have the condition to support their children’s secondary school studies. Another likely explanation is that some of the male Lao Loum dropouts in reality are members of the extended family sent to live with relatives in Pha Oudom in order to complete primary school. After completing Grade 5, they return home, thus adding to the drop out among Grade 5-leavers from the Pha Oudom primary school. Yet another, but less likely explanation would be that the relatively more developed economy of the district center produces job opportunities for male Grade 5 leavers.
Figure 3: Calculated survival rate of pupils enrolled in Grade 1 per sex and language group, Central Pha Oudom

Pupils pertaining to the Mon-Khmer language group are either Khmou or Lameth.
Families’ relation to education: conditions, expectancies and drop out

Families’ relationship to school education is above all determined by two factors: their economic resources and their own level of education. Since a family can be wealthy but uneducated or educated and not so wealthy, economic resources do not always imply a high educational level and a high school diploma does not necessarily lead to good economic conditions. However, the trust in the value of formal education that all interviewed families expressed, wealthy and poor as well as educated and uneducated, testifies to the fact that formal education and good economic conditions often depend on each other. There is a general belief that education is one of the few means that a family may use to improve its conditions of life. However, as an instrument for improvement of the social condition, education is unequally serviceable for families, depending on their economic and cultural resources.

THE BELIEF IN FORMAL EDUCATION

Formal education, so the interviewed families believed, opens the door to a better future and to the job market. This is a doubtful idea, since all visited villages were full of people with a complete primary school diploma (Grade 5) who don’t have a job, if having a job means employment. Most Grade 5 leavers worked in the rice field, just as did persons with Grade 1 or Grade 2. Interviewed families also expressed their worry about the inflation of the value of educational diplomas. 15 years back, they said, a diploma from lower secondary education meant access to the job market, but nowadays one needs at least an upper secondary degree. For families in less remote areas for whom formal schooling for a long time had been a visible part of life, there was also an increasing experience of educational investments that have led nowhere and of drop out from lower and upper secondary education.

For families living at a larger distance to modern education, like the Lung villagers, the connection between formal educational diplomas and jobs appeared to be more blurred. Since what more exactly happens in the world of the educated, in the urban world, was not exactly known, the educational project became more naïve and less well-informed. In Lung, the more well-established families made the sacrifice to send their children to the lower secondary school in Paktad with a hope that this would change their destiny. Both Grade 5 pupils in the Lung primary school and lower secondary children from the village encountered at the dormitory in Pakhad also confessed their dreams of becoming nurses, teachers or policemen, but had no idea of what this would imply in terms of studies or job careers. They looked into a barely opened window to the modern world of employment and professions and had difficulties imagining how to orient themselves in this unknown landscape.

However, interviewed families in the various social settings represented by the selected schools valued formal education also for other reasons. Education changes the individual, making him or her more capable of finding the way in society and less likely to become a
victim of circumstances or of the action of others. Someone who can read, write and make mathematical calculations is an able person, useful to himself and others. An uneducated, divorced mother and caretaker of three children in one of the villages outside Pha Oudom gave the example of a visit she made to the hospital in Houayxay some years ago with a sick child who needed a surgical operation for which the family had paid a fortune. Because of her illiteracy, she had not been able to find the surgery room. Other interviewed families gave examples of how a reasonably well educated person is less likely of being cheated at the market place. In other words, formal education was also sought for because of its internal value and its magical force to make the person different and more capable.

EDUCATION AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The connection between formal education and the valorization of the person is particularly clear in the role of education in marital strategies. While all interviewed families emphasize that young people first of all should marry because of love, not for other reasons, they also believed that the educated person potentially marries with a partner at a similar, or in the case of the woman, a higher educational level. In Lung, a major concern for a poor family whose school-aged son refused to go to school was that he would not be able to marry; since primary education had become a normal thing among the villagers, no girl one in the village or in neighboring villages would fancy marrying him. A person’s educational level in relation to the general educational level in the community influenced the perception of the person.

However, this transformative force of education was not entirely without dilemmas. Education is also, as some villagers in the rural village of Lung pointed out, change the person who benefits from it, so that he or she no longer fully respects the family bonds that were necessary for the educational investment in the first place. The few educated persons from the village who had reached high diplomas in the education system did not wish to return to the village and they disappeared to the city. Perhaps it is no surprise that it was in the village with the weakest ties to modern society, Lung, that villagers also raised doubts about the effect of formal education on the individual. In two different interviews, family heads expressed concern that members of the extended family who had left the village after getting a higher educational diploma had proved to be less interested in supporting their family of origin, acquiring certain distaste for the simple country life.

In other words, education potentially changes the person into someone who is a stranger to the social environment of origin. This power of formal education to transform the individual and create a distance to her origin was perhaps most visible in the case of the Plan so called interns, young Grade 5 or lower secondary school leavers from minority villages who had been offered a temporary employment as interpreters and facilitators. Finding themselves halfway between a local world of subsistence farmers where people go to the rice fields early in the morning and where girls marry at an early age, and a modern world of NGO workshops, educated persons and occasional foreigners passing by, they confessed their aspiration to leave the peasant condition and dressed, even in the surrounding of the village, as city residents.
AFFORDING EDUCATION

For poor families, education costs money that they often simply do not have. These costs can be direct, as in the case of school fees and other school charges that in lower and upper secondary education may reach insurmountable levels for a poor family. They may also be less concretely visible and take the form of indirect costs, as when school-enrolled children cannot contribute to the survival of the family.

**Direct school costs**

Direct school costs are highest in secondary education. During the visits to the villages, numerous accounts were given by interviewees of interrupted attempts to finalize secondary education because of lack of family funds. The yearly school fee in lower secondary education in Pha Oudom Secondary School is 230,000 Kip and families claimed that several additional smaller amounts appear during the school year. Supplementary costs are expenditures for school uniform and school material. If boarding schools are not available, families who do not live at walking distance from the nearest lower secondary school also need to arrange for accommodation close to the school or, as some families did, construct a small house for their children in the vicinity of the school and support them with food. For poor families, this was inaccessible.

Although the direct costs for schooling in primary education are lower, they represent a considerable spending for low income families. Local school fees being decided by the school’s VEDC, they vary between schools. While in Lung, a family pays at the most 30,000 Kip per year regardless of the number of enrolled children, families in Homsouk spend between 35,000 and 45,000 Kip for up to two children in school depending on the grade. However, all school principals claim there are reductions for poorer families. According to the information provided by the principal, close to 60 percent of families in the Homsouk village does not pay any school fees at all. In addition to school fees, all schools seem to collect smaller amounts of money on a regular basis for such things as hiring a machine for cutting the grass on the school yard, giving extra lessons outside normal school hours for weak students or sport activities. While interviewed families complain about these payments and tend to see them as a means to fill the pockets of the teachers, school principals assure that they are legitimate and unavoidable. In the direct expenses for schooling, costs for school uniforms and sandals should also be included, although schools do not implement existing rules in this domain with much severity.

In primary education, perhaps the most important effect of direct school costs (such as school fees and other regular payments during the year, expenses for school uniforms and exercise books and the like) is not the difficulty that poor families encounter in assembling the money. In comparison to other costs of life, direct expenditures for primary school are not undefeatable. However, according to the interviews, the continuous reminder of having difficulties paying these costs, or having to send their child to school without a uniform that the family cannot afford, function as evidence for poor families that education is a risky world in which they do not feel confident. As the school class mapping that was made in Grade 5 in all three schools shows, coming from a poor family in most cases also means being a student who teachers regard as less brilliant and less likely to continue to secondary education (see below).
Indirect costs for schooling

If direct expenditures for schooling for some families may be a strongly contributing factor behind drop out, a far more powerful factor are indirect costs. All households need to make sure that household members collectively can invest sufficient time in work for guaranteeing that there is enough food to eat for the whole year and that expenditure for life necessities can be covered. Having a large family is one of the means to secure the conditions of life, not the least after retirement, since there are more household members who can work. For the poor families that were interviewed, survival is a daily struggle without margins. Since poor families most often have land of low quality, little land or land at a great distance in the mountains, they have to spend all time they have at their disposal working and all household members need to contribute. In spite of the work time they invest, they get insufficient return from their rice fields and need other sources of income, such as day-labor or occasional street vending.

In this situation, children are both an asset and a trouble. They are assets in as far as they can contribute to the family economy by doing work at home or in the fields and as far as they as future adults represent a guarantee for the survival of the family. But they are also a difficulty, since they need attention and since they are expected to spend most of their time in school during the years of schooling. As youngster, they need to be taken care of. In the visited villages, parents often set off to the rice fields early in the morning carrying their small ones on their back, since they had no one else who could care for them during the 10 or 12 hours they spent in the fields. As mentioned above, in Lung village, a pilot project was being implemented in which the village community employed women to care for others’ children at night when the parents needed to sleep over night in the fields.

However, when all household members are busy producing the necessities of life, elder, school-aged children do represent a resource. They are mature enough to take care of their younger sisters and brothers. Most often girls, daughters, are the most likely candidates, since care-taking is seen as a female responsibility. For poor families, the family economy is most often so weak that the household cannot support receiving relatives who stay with the family, i.e. additional members of the extended family who can attend to family needs of this kind. As a contrast, such solutions are common among richer families who can keep bigger household. In the interviews, the major reason for school dropout mentioned by the interviewees was this kind of family responsibility. It could include not only taking care of younger children, but attending to sick parents, seeing to that there was food on the table and taking care of the family house when parents were absent. A Lao household can be compared to the running of a rather complex small business company. Adults disappear for most of the day to the rice fields, food has to be prepared, products need to be purchased at the lowest possible price, children should be attended to, sisters and brothers need to be sent to school, the house must be cleaned, etc. For the interviewed families, keeping a house in good order was a moral obligation. For poorer family, this often has to be secured by a school-aged child, often the daughter, who then runs the risk of becoming a drop-out. The interviews

For similar reasons, school-aged children may need to contribute to the heavy and time-consuming work in the rice field. As school statistics show, this is a particular urgency in the times of the work-intensive harvest when especially poor families on rural areas simply have to make use of their children, since there is no other work force.

For school principals and teachers, these necessities of life are often seen as shortcomings of the individual family. Families are believed not to understand or to disrespect the value of education. However, interviews testify that poverty is the main reason for work-related drop out of this kind. Better-off families can simply afford keeping at least some of their children in school. This is possible because there is sufficient income to guarantee life necessities, and
also because richer families often can keep larger households in which there are other persons who can take care of daily work in the family. An additional factor is the bad coordination of school activities with the agricultural cycle, as in the case of Lung village. Since school exams coincide with harvest time, children miss the exams and have to repeat. Considering all the time lost in teaching because of teachers’ absence, there is no reason why the school calendar could not be adjusted to local needs in a more fruitful way.

Economic constraints and poverty, then, heavily contribute to keeping children out of school and represent a major obstacle to education for all. In the recommendations, some suggestions will be made on policy approaches that may reduce this negative impact.

THE CULTURAL DISTANCE TO SCHOOL

However, the full impact of purely economic factors cannot be explained by these factors alone. They are reinforced by a cultural distance to school which normally goes hand in hand with poor economic conditions. Families often experienced a social, psychological and cultural remoteness in relation to school, that, as we shall see, school education makes little efforts to reduce.

When one compares interviews with villagers in rural Lung village to those with inhabitants in semi-rural Homsouk and semi-urban Pha Oudom, what becomes particularly visible is the growing importance of education in people’s lives in more urban-like areas. While for Lung villagers, formal education to a large degree represented an unknown world in which no one had really entered and knew the secrets of, at least some families in Homsouk and even more families in Pha Oudom comprised at least some member who had spent many years of their lives in the education system. However, particularly poor and uneducated people in the district center of Pha Oudom shared the same feeling of remoteness in relation to education which characterized small farmers in Lung village.

This distance to education expressed itself as a sort of silence. When asked about their experiences of school or their opinions on teaching, uneducated parents said little or nothing, because they had little to say. They also emphasized that they didn’t know much and typically denied all claims or rights to have an opinion. In the interviews, they were unable to compare teaching ten years ago to teaching now, and they could not make judgments on the quality of teachers’ explanation or on pedagogical methods, since they had no experience or knowledge to build such judgments on. If they had been visiting the local school, as many parents claimed they had, they possessed few means to understand what they had seen. They also confessed that they kept silent at parents’ meeting and that they expected teachers to assume the full responsibility for teaching.

Since most parents in all schools have a lower educational level than the teachers have who teach their children, this attitude prevailed in parents’ interviews. When less educated parents sometimes did express opinions on school matters, these opinions were typically restrained to tangible, concrete and often economic aspects. For example the made the point that the today’s school operates in new, cement buildings and not in bamboo classrooms, which they regarded as an achievement, or emphasized that children have books, which was seldom the case in older days. Often they recognized a good teacher as someone who establishes good discipline and order in the classroom and who have clear authority. Seldom, or never, they commented upon the teaching content or on teaching methods.
This lack of sufficient cultural competence to be able to form an opinion on teachers’ work or on the functioning and content of education protects school and teachers from critical eyes. In the parents’ interviews, only the most highly educated and socially most established parents expressed reflected opinions on teaching or on teaching content. While interviewees who hadn’t finished primary level could talk at length about economic difficulties, school payments and other material aspects of school education, or criticize that teachers’ often came late or were absent from class, they never pronounced themselves on qualitative aspects of teaching and learning. This was an unknown world to them.

**Effects of the cultural distance to school**

This cultural distance, or gap, between primary school education, its teachers, curricula and textbooks, on the one hand, and the population that education serves, on the other hand, is a major factor behind school dropout and the uneasy feeling of personal deficiency that so many children and families experience in relation to school. In the next section of this report, we will return the pedagogical dimensions of this cultural distance. Here, two other effects will be emphasized.

First of all, since parents rarely or never make any claims on primary teaching in terms of quality, societal pressure is not a factor that may change classroom practices and outdated pedagogies, at least not in rural and semi-urban settings such as the ones found in Pha Oudom District. In the interviews, only two interviewees expressed a well-reflected, well-informed criticism of existing teaching practices. Both had high educational diplomas and had had the possibility to visit schools in different contexts in the country. Both demanded a higher quality of education for their children. Typically, one of them was active in trying to arrange for a missing English teacher in his daughter’s school.

Secondly, since primary school teaching is incapable of overcoming the enormous pedagogical challenges that primary teaching and learning necessarily faces (see next section), children and families with weak cultural and educational resources do not get much help from school in their attempts to overcome learning difficulties. Neither does primary school teaching do much to turn their educational experience into something positive and understandable. The years in primary school are years of numerous incomprehensible lessons, endless copying, patient waiting and routine-like repetition. It is not surprising this experience leads up to a final dropout before or after the end of Grade 5 when prospects are dim for the educational investment to produce any tangible results in terms of higher diploma or job perspectives.

One of the most commonly mentioned reasons put forward by the interviewed parents for pulling a child out of school, for example after finishing Grade 5, was that the child did not have the sufficient “aptitude” for learning. Parents clarified that their son or daughter had repeated one or two classes and always got bad scores. At the end, parents thought that the investment in schooling was not worthwhile. But in view of the classroom observations discussed in the following section of this report, school children’s bad school results are above all a result of the bad quality of teaching, not of primary school pupils’ lack of aptitude.

At the very best primary school students from uneducated and low-income families may have achieved basic literacy skills at the end of primary school. Most pupils in Grade 5 do not have the knowledge and skills assumed by the curriculum at this level. Much to the contrary, they have huge weaknesses in all subjects. From the perspective of these families, little is gained from prolonging an educational experience into lower secondary school that has been
full of uncertainties and personal shortcomings, and that will most probably end up with repetition and drop out in any case.26

PUPILS’ VIEWS OF SCHOOL

In general pupils were content or might be rather loyal to the school and the teachers. They attended school unless they are sick, walked to school with their Plan bags, came in time and sat and waited for the teacher. Teachers were generally accepted, even if pupils pointed at some teachers being more kind or good persons than others. Although pupils may have been reluctant to criticize teachers openly during the conversations held in Grade 5, the impression was that pupils did not think badly of their teachers or feared them.

Mathematics was generally seen as the most difficult subject. This is probably so, first of all, because calculations are inevitable and that they lead up to visibly correct or incorrect answers. Since teaching quality generally is low, the bad learning outcomes become more visible than in others subjects where pupils may save themselves through copying others. In fact, the small attempts from the research team to check pupils’ skills in mathematics indicated that learning in this subject probably is better than in most other subjects.

According to the school class mapping in Grade 5 (see section on method) and conversations with pupils in this grade, all pupils wanted to continue studying in secondary school except for four boys at Lung Primary. The future occupations pupils fancied were, as previously mentioned, becoming a nurse, teacher, policeman and solider. These professions represent the most visible ones in modern society, beyond occupations that do not normally include employment, such as farming and running of small shops. Probably they are also the most accessible professions that are normally the only entry into modern society and possibly, for the few who succeed, a step in changing one’s social class. It is interesting that the Grade 5 pupils with whom conversations were held all emphasized that they both wanted to become teachers, nurses and the like, and at the same time return to their village to teach or help the community and their families. One pupil fancied to become a policeman in order to come back to the village and “to put the drug dealers in prison”.

This harmonic vision of making an educational and professional career while maintaining the strong bonds to the local community contrasted to the somewhat pessimistic experience of the interviewed adults, including the Plan interns, who were well aware of the transformative force of education discussed above that made educated persons unwilling to accept the harsh conditions of rural life and threatened the strong solidarity ties of the rural society. It is likely that the harmonizing view of the Grade 5 pupils results from young children’s wish to combine their affinity with the known world of their origin with their hopes for getting access to the unknown modern world of professions and employment. In Lung, four Grade 5 boys refused this perspective, wanting to work in the rice field in the same way as their fathers.

Pupils showed an almost surprising interest in attending school. Perhaps because their parents had left early to work in the rice field and because of a lack of clocks or watches at home, they normally turned up at school long before teachers did, and they uncomplainingly sat through the school day in spite of the entirely passive and reproductive role given to them in teaching. Patiently they listened to the teacher, copied the blackboard, waited and sat still in

26 It could be added that automatic promotion may keep children in school for longer time, but it will not in any way increase the level of their learning.
the desk without often understanding much of the teaching content. Tolerantly they set out to do exercises that they often did not understand and could not solve. Moreover, ambitious pupils, mostly girls, were seen to hand in books on Monday morning borrowed over the weekend. There were reading boxes supported by Plan to enhance the learning to read.

There may be many explanations for this rather content attitude towards school. One obviously is that school, in a local environment dominated by hard and routine-like work, represents something different and interesting, in spite of the traditional teaching it offers. In school, ideas and knowledge different from those taken for granted at home may appear, and school is probably the only place in most children’s world in which there is written language. Also, especially in rural and semi-rural schools like Lung and Homsouk, most adults leave home early, sometimes making them empty places where no events take place. It is also probable that the strong parent authority that characterizes Lao family education makes it unlikely that children, as is the case in rich countries in the developed world, would engage in much truancy. Finally, school is a place where children meet. Not going to school implies not seeing all the peers that after school disappear.

In other words, school pupils’ attitudes towards school are – this is the view that emerged during field work – in many ways an asset for education development. However, it would be wrong to assume that young children in a developing country like Laos would formulate their own individual plans for their future in the way that Western countries at least ideologically assume they do. The kind of individualism that characterizes Western, rich countries’ thinking about children’s personal development and life careers has no breeding ground when the only means for survival is the collective work effort of the family, or the extended family, and the solidarity bonds that tie family members together. It is not the individual school-aged child who decides on whether to continue in school or not, it is the family and the parents.

Secondly, in spite of their striking interest in school and teaching, it should be remembered that primary pupils are strongly socialized by the kind of teaching to which they have been submitted during their school years. Any attempt to change the existing, teacher-centered teaching styles will have to face the habits, expectancies and attitudes towards teaching that pupils have developed. Since these habits are centered on being entirely passive and copying, pupils’ attitudes and expectancies represent a major difficulty to overcome. We shall return to this aspect in the next section of the report.

**DROP OUT**

Most parents’ interviews provided examples of dropout from school. There were few cases in which no school-aged child in the household had interrupted schooling after Grade 5. Very often someone had dropped out before reaching the end of primary education. Let us briefly comment upon the main reasons for this dropout.

**The need to work**

Most commonly, parents claimed that the main reason was economic. The family could only afford educating one child, normally the eldest, and the younger ones had to satisfy with either Grade 5 or a lower grade.
Such economic reasons were often combined with explanations that pointed to the necessity for the dropped out children to contribute to the reproduction of the family either by labor in the fields or by contributing to household work. In the school class mapping, Grade 5 pupils in all three schools were asked to document in detail what they had done after school and during the weekend. This documentation revealed that most children had numerous daily domestic tasks during weekdays, such as fetching water or firewood, cooking, cleaning and looking after younger sisters and brothers. During weekends, work in the field and watching cattle added to these activities. This picture was confirmed by the interviews. Even if school-aged children obviously were not constantly working, they were firmly integrated into daily work in the family. According to the interviews, a normal cause for dropout is that the illness in the family, an accident, sudden loss of income, crop failure or something similar made it necessary to count on a school-aged child as on an adult. In other words, especially in poor families, children constantly ran the risk of filling the role of adults when necessary. Such mechanism often lay behind dropout.

This picture was confirmed by the two interviews carried through with school drop outs from lower secondary school. In both cases, the interviewees had successfully finished primary education and continued to lower secondary. However, their families could neither sustain the absence of more than one child from home, nor find the money for paying all the costs for secondary education more than once.

Marriage

A particular issue was marriage. For poor and uneducated families, the transition of children to adulthood often came earlier than in richer and educated families, forced by the necessities of life. School education kept the young boy or girl in a state of childhood, preventing them from becoming economically productive household members and to form a new family, thus enlarging the family network. The interviews provided several examples of girls who had dropped out of school because of bad school results or a need to take care of responsibilities in the household, or both in combination. In all these cases, marriage presented itself as a sort of necessity. Once out of school, the young girl of 15 or 16 should normally marry. In other words, early marriage is rarely the cause of dropout but an effect of social conditions that make it difficult to keep children in school and in the state of childhood. If primary education would be more successful in keeping teenage girls and boys in school, then families would probably be more

Extension and availability of the educations system

One visible factor that influences parents’ and families’ evaluation of the viability of continued schooling in lower secondary education is the availability and proximity of secondary schools. In Lung, interviews suggested that the transition to lower secondary had increased substantially with the establishment of Pakhad lower secondary school and its boarding facilities. Previously, families with ambitions to educate their children had to send the even farther away and construct “small houses” for them to live in. Similarly, one of the reasons for the comparatively high portion of Grade 5-leavers in Homsouk who continued to lower secondary education was the proximity of the nearest secondary school.
A cultural distance to school that primary teaching reinforces rather than overcomes

Finally, an important factor behind dropout is the low quality and malfunctioning of primary teaching. Since teaching and learning conditions are particularly difficult, primary teaching faces enormous challenges. Not only do material conditions constrain teachers, they also need to surpass the inescapable cultural and often linguistic distance between the children they teach and the curriculum demands transmitted in textbooks, exams and the teacher’s manual. Unfortunately, the outcome is unfavorable for keeping children in school and preventing dropout. We will come back to this aspect in more detail, but it needs to be mentioned when dropout is discussed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the positive side, most interviewed Grade 5 pupils wished to continue their schooling, and most parents declared their will that their children should transit to secondary education. The following recommendations aim at making more justice to this positive attitude towards education by reducing the impact of difficulties that may distort it.

1. As argued above, the extension and availability of education is beyond doubt an important factor that influences dropout. Plan’s support to the lower secondary school in Pakhad is positive, not the least the creation of boarding facilities. The support to preschool obviously helps families and prepares children for primary education. It is recommended that Plan continues and possibly expands this support

2. However, the expansion of the school system to include four years of lower secondary education as Basic Education in order to meet the global imperative of nine years of schooling for all seems to have raised the demand and expectations of pupils and parents. There is a risk that a continued schooling after Grade 5 will become a “false promise” that erodes the current strong belief in education among families in the villages. This may hit back on enrollment in primary school. The costs for schooling increase substantial at secondary level. This calls for a more systematic attention by Plan to the secondary level. It is recommended that Plan expands its scholarship program; that this program targets both talented girls and boys from poor families and that it encompass support up to the end of upper secondary school.

3. A concern put forward by the VEDCs, especially in Lung but also in the other three schools, is the mismatch between school semesters and harvesting season(s). Children in Grade 1 are too young to be left at home when parents leave for weeks to the rice field. School-aged children may miss roughly one month of schooling. Some come back to school, some not. Especially in Lung village this was a major factor behind dropout in the early years of primary education. It is understood that this is a situation that has been discussed at length but we do not know if there has been any pilot projects with local adaption of the school year to the agricultural cycle. It is recommended that the DEB with Plan support explores this issue and requests to be

allowed to pilot an adjustment of the school year to harvesting seasons in relevant villages in the district, such as Lung.

4. Parents are regularly asked to contribute to the local school and its activities. This contribution differs from school to school. It is acknowledged that schools may have different needs and are allowed to set the level of contribution according to these needs. However this creates an unfavorable situation in some schools as compared to others. *It is recommended* that the DEB sets a ceiling cost per family and year. *It is further recommended* that schools (the principals) are transparent as regards the purpose of these contributions and how they are used.

5. To a varying degree, schools assist poor families in sustaining the schooling of their children. According to the principals particularly poor families could, for example, be exempt from paying the school fee. However, it was difficult to discern clear principles behind this kind of assistance. Since the poorest families are often the most uneducated families, they have difficulties, as testified to by the interviews, in expressing their needs in relation to school. *It is recommended* that the DEB and Plan encourage the principals and local school committees to establish clear principles for how particularly poor families can be relieved of some of the school payments. When adequate, reduction of payments may be substituted by contributions in labor.

6. The initiative in Lung to create facilities for parents to leave their youngest children in the care of others at night in order to make overnight stays in the rice field possible was promising. *It is recommended* that the DEB and Plan explore similar possibilities in other villages with similar needs.

7. Obviously, the awareness of the scope of dropout from primary education, and between primary and lower secondary education, is not as high as could be expected. Principals normally stated much lower dropout rates and much higher transition rates than the ones carefully calculated in the research study. *It is recommended* that the usage of school statistics on enrollment per grade, sex and language group that was made in this report should be made yearly at the DEB level. This would provide the DEB and Plan with a clearer view of the functioning of primary education.

Recommendations related to the quality of teaching will be made in the following chapter of the report.
Teaching and learning

In all visited schools, a number of lessons were observed in most grades (Grades 2 to 5). The observations partly used the same methodological instruments as in the classroom observation study carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture in the study on Teacher performance in Lao primary education. As we shall see, results are very similar to the ones in the MoE study.

When the following rather dark picture of teaching and learning in the three schools (four, if Hangdoy is included) is presented, one should keep in mind that the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical conditions for teaching are very difficult. As pointed out in the previous section of the report, the cultural gap between the home environment and school is in most cases immense compared to for example school in developed countries where parents often are at least as highly educated as school teachers are. The impact of this gap is further strengthened by the language situation. In the schools populated by minority children (Lung, Hangdoy and Homsouk), and especially so in the school situated in an area where the language of instruction was not daily used (Lung), learning in all subjects was necessarily at the same time language learning (i.e. of Lao).

In other words, there is no point in “blaming the teacher” for a teaching situation that is shaped by a multitude of factors, only one of which is the training and professional expertise of teachers. This issue will be further discussed at the end of this section.

CLASSROOM INTERACTION

The description and analysis of classroom teaching and learning are based on the lesson reports from the 19 lessons observations. Some of the most pertinent dimensions of teaching and learning raised by these observations will be addressed here.

Constrained language use by pupils

The observations show that teachers do virtually all speaking in the classroom, leaving no space at all for students to talk. Moreover, teachers’ questions to pupils are with few exceptions closed questions (as opposed to open ones). There is a one, given correct answer, which is seldom the case in ordinary life. As a consequence, pupils use a language that is stripped from most functions that language normally fulfills in communication. The language that pupils use in the classroom is almost entirely limited to single word sentences or to repeating words or sentences from the blackboard or the textbook. Only in one lesson out of 19 more carefully observed lessons (see section on method), pupils made contributions that consisted of more than one sentence (Grade 4, Hangdoy Primary School). Pupils never engage

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28 Moe (2003). Teacher performance in Lao Primary Education. Operational Study no 1. Teacher Education Department, TTEST
in discussions led by the teacher and never present arguments. Since all theories of learning emphasize the importance of the learner using language in an active and complex way in order for learning to occur, the present situation is undoubtedly very negative and a sign of low teaching quality.

**Teacher-centered teaching and passive pupils**

Pupils assume an entirely passive role. They repeat what the teacher has said or words or phrases from the textbook. Most of all, they copy. Except from waiting and doing nothing, the dominating pupil activity in lessons is copying. In many lesson observations, the teacher first copied a text from the textbook to the blackboard and then pupils copied the same text to their exercise books, in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of children had their own textbooks and could copy at home or not at all. Also, pupils seldom or never took initiatives of any kind. During the lesson observations, it happened only a few times that a pupil called for the teacher’s attention in order to ask a question about an exercise. In situations where the teacher addressed the whole class, for example when introducing a new lesson or topic, it never happened that a pupil raised the hand in order to contribute with a question or a remark. Since pupils are given such a passive role in all lessons, they do nothing without instructions or orders from the teacher. As a consequence, many pupils just sit and wait when they do not understand or when they have finished an activity. Waiting and doing nothing by far occupied most time during the observed lessons.

**Textbook-centered teaching**

Teaching is also entirely textbook-oriented. With the exception of occasional questions in the so called motivation phase in the beginning of a new lesson, all references are made to the textbook content as it is expressed in the textbook, i.e. the textbook is never used as a source of information together with other possible sources. Only one of the observed teachers sometimes used individual and open questions to the students. In all other lessons chorus questions and answers dominated entirely and they always referred to the textbook or to the blackboard. Group work, when used, had no character of group work as a pedagogical work form. Instead, group work consisted of the same basic activity as the one dominating in teaching directed to the whole class. This aim was always to identify the correct sentence or word in the textbooks which students, often without understanding why, believed could be the correct one.

**Time wastage**

The combination of teacher-centered and textbook-centered teaching dominated by copying, on the one hand, and weak learning and passive learners, on the other hand, has a consequence a huge waste of time. During the observed lessons, many pupils did not do very much more than copy (parts of) what the teacher had written on the blackboard. In several lesson photographs were taken of what a number of pupils had written in their exercise books at different times during the lesson. In most classrooms a considerable number of pupils had not managed to write more than a few lines in their exercise book even after 60 or 70 minutes lesson time. Asked why, they replied that they did not understand and did not know what to do. Even pupils with the best school performance did very little during the normally 90
minutes lessons. Sometimes, teaching time was used in a way that forced total passivity for 85 minutes onto all pupils, for example when some teachers in Lao language lessons made all pupils read the same short passage in the textbook aloud in front of the class during 90 minutes.29

For the sake of clarity, some of the main characteristics of classroom communication can be summed up as follows:

**Language use**
- Teachers speak more than 95% of the time used for speaking
- Students almost never get individual questions
- Most questions from the teacher are collective questions producing collective answers
- Students almost never get open questions
- Students almost always get closed questions with a “correct” answer
- When students speak, they almost always use single word sentences
- When students speak, they never or very seldom use more complex language
- When students speak, they never or very seldom argue or discuss
- Teachers never or very seldom engage in verbal negotiations or discussions
- Students very seldom or never take initiatives through asking questions or expressing opinions

**CONSEQUENCES FOR LEARNING**

Teaching, then, is teacher-centered and textbook-centered to an extreme point. This has a negative effect on learning. Let us briefly point to some of the most important consequences.

**New knowledge is learnt in a fragmentized way**

Using Piaget’s terminology, teaching does not create a fruitful connection between new teaching content and pupils’ existing cognitive structure (their already existing knowledge, understanding and skills). It never happened during any of the observed lessons that teachers tried to find out what individual pupils or pupils as a group already knew about a topic or phenomena. Consequently, it never happened that teachers tried to adapt new content neither to what pupils knew already or did not know, nor to what pupils believed or thought about a specific topic.

For pupils, the lack of interest for what they knew or thought lead to great learning difficulties. In Piaget’s perspective, new teaching content normally could neither be assimilated in a fruitful way into existing knowledge structures, nor provoke an accommodation in the sense that pupils’ ways of understanding changed and became more advanced. Using Vygotsky, the same learning situation may be described as being far outside the zone of proximal development. With reference to Skinner’s behaviorism, the expected

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29 The concerned teachers motivated these lesson plans by their need to evaluate each pupil’s reading ability. But if this was the objective, a small number of individual pupils could read for a few minutes to the teacher in subsequent lessons, while the whole class at the same time would be engaged in doing exercises. It should be noted that these two lessons because of their extremely repetitive content are not included among the 19 observed lessons used for characterizing classroom interaction.
learning behavior could not possibly occur because it was not preceded by anything like a reasonable chain of “operant conditioning”. In fact, new knowledge or teaching content was constantly learnt by pupils in a fragmentized way.

There are numerous examples of this from the observed lessons. An example can be chosen from a Mathematics lesson on geometry aiming at explaining various geometrical forms such as the quadrate, the triangle and the rectangle. Pupil interviews at the end of the lesson (i.e. after 90 minutes) showed that not one single pupil had really understood the abstract definitions given by the teacher and the textbook of these geometrical forms. At the end of the lesson interviewed pupils at the very best had vague ideas about what a quadrate is as opposed to a rectangle, for example. After another lesson on the causes for the malaria disease, no one of the interviewed pupils could really tell what malaria is. Examples like these could be multiplied. In fact, all observed lesson were full of misunderstandings, unresolved doubts and mistakes on the side of the pupils, simply because teaching went on regardless of their understanding, ideas and existing skills.

**Teachers are obsessed by the textbook**

Another striking aspect of teaching is teachers’ obsession with the textbook. As was observed previously, it never happened that teachers more than accidentally referred to anything else than the textbook in their explanations or exercises. The real world outside the textbook did not exist. In many observed lessons in subjects such as Lao Language or The World Around Us, teachers’ refusal to refer to anything else than the textbook became particularly absurd, since the topic or phenomena dealt with by the textbook existed in the surrounding world known to the pupils and since pupils already had ideas and experiences of this topic.

This textbook fixation clearly reinforced learning difficulties, because it made it even more difficult for pupils to relate their own experiences of and ideas about the world to new teaching content. The reasons for teachers’ total focus on the textbook will be discussed below.

**Growing discrepancy between teaching and learning**

Because of weak learning from Grade 1 onwards, pupils accumulate learning difficulties. Since the demands of the curriculum – such as these demands are made concrete in the textbook, exercises and teachers’ teaching – increase when pupils advance from Grade 1 to Grade 2 and from Grade 2 to Grade 3, etc., pupils in higher grades are expected to have a minimum of knowledge and skills when they transit to a higher grade. A simple example is basic Mathematics. Primary Mathematics normally starts with addition, then continue to subtraction, and then go on to multiplication. Only when these skills are mastered by pupils, division is introduced. It is difficult to calculate with division without mastering the more basic mathematical skills. But this is exactly what happens in most classrooms and in all subjects.

In higher grades of primary education in the visited schools, few pupils had the necessary knowledge and skills demanded by the curriculum, neither in reading and writing, nor in in Mathematics. There were numerous examples of this discrepancy in the classroom observations. The most visible ones were when perhaps the majority of pupils in Grades 4 and 5 had great difficulties even in copying sentences written by the teacher on the blackboard. In a Grade 5 lesson in Lao language in Homsouk, perhaps one third of all pupils could understand the meaning of the text in the textbook, nor the exercises written on the backboard by the teacher. Another example is a Grade 5 lesson in Pha Oudom on how to use parentheses...
in order to facilitate the calculation of mathematical items that include several operations, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. After great difficulties and much confusion, at least some pupils began, at the end of the lesson, to understand the principles of order that should be applied for the different kind of operations. However, most pupils still calculated the exercises wrongly and got wrong answers, simply because they made simple mistakes in addition, subtraction or multiplication. Such basic skills normally should be acquired by pupils in lower grades. Lesson observations provide many similar situations from all 19 observed lessons.

Some of the most important aspects of teaching that create learning difficulties can be summarized as follows:

**Aspects of teaching that are negative for learning**
- All lessons depart from and keep very close to the textbook
- All exercises are taken from the textbook and all correct answers come from the textbook
- Teaching gives little or no attention to pupils’ existing knowledge, ideas or experiences
- Pupils’ experience, ideas or thoughts are very seldom or never included in the teaching process
- Teaching almost never establishes a link or connection between new teaching content (from the textbook or curriculum) and pupils existing knowledge, ideas or understanding
- From Grade 1 onwards, there is a growing discrepancy between the demands of the curriculum and pupils existing knowledge and skills
- As a result of this discrepancy, classes in Grade 4 and 5 are very heterogeneous; while a few pupils may correspond to curriculum demands, some have difficulties and many have great difficulties.

**TEACHER’S DIFFICULTIES**

A few words should be said about teachers’ difficulties in front of the classes they teach.

**Coping with heterogeneous classes**

The observed teachers had great difficulties in coping with the teaching situation they found themselves in. One of their major difficulties was the heterogeneous classes. Facing so many many pupils with varying degrees of learning difficulties, teachers seemed to get use to the situation and give up any serious attempt to change it. It was too difficult to find a way to surpass pupils’ complex and varying need for assistance.

A strange manifestation of this attitude was that teachers often, during the time of exercises that normally occur in a lesson after half an hour of teacher talk (introduction, explanation, copying), simply left the classroom, leaving pupils work on their own. If teachers did not leave the classroom, they normally sat passively at the teacher’s desk or they did other kinds of work, such as correction of exercise books from an earlier lesson. This was strange,
since this was the only time available for assisting pupils individually. A possible explanation is that teachers gradually come to accept that very few pupils actually are able to solve exercises or even to fully understand the teaching content, and that they, as teachers, are better off not going into the endless learning difficulties lying behind this inability. Such an attempt would never be sufficient, since pupils’ need of assistance is endless.

Caught between the curriculum/textbook demands and pupils’ actual learning

Caught between the demands of the curriculum (textbook) and pedagogical demands originating from the pupils’ actual knowledge and skills, teachers choose the curriculum and textbook. In other words, the observed teachers regularly, in all lessons, were little concerned with what pupils actually learned or understood, but entirely focused on teaching the lesson content found in the textbook. As a result, teaching normally, as a rule, went far above the understanding of most or all pupils.

It is easy to understand this choice. Firstly, teachers believed they first of all had a duty to teach the curriculum. This is what is expected from a teacher and a good teacher is a teacher who has taught the curriculum at the end of the year. Secondly, the observed and interviewed teachers did not have any visible alternatives than to go on teaching. There was no visible way they could resolve the learning problems that pupils had. By the force of habit, the teachers also got used to teaching classes where few of the pupils were able to follow the teaching, understand the content and do the exercises.

Certain components of the ritualistic classroom language that teachers regularly employ exemplify this kind of resignation, especially many teachers’ habit of inviting the whole class to fill in the end of a phrase that they formulate. This produces the famous “singing” that characterizes much of the classroom interaction. The function of the “filling in” seems to be that the teachers get at least a feeling of participation and understanding from the side of the pupils. In practice, most pupils do not know exactly why a certain word should be used to complete or “fill in” the teacher’s sentence, but they learn to participate in the ritual exchange they are invited to share by the teacher.

Not knowing different ways to teach

At the end of the interviews, teachers were confronted with their teacher-centered and textbook-centered teaching styles. In the discussion that followed many of the difficulties teachers experience came to the surface.

Normally teachers complained about the lack of teaching materials, pupils’ weak interest or time for studying and sometimes about big classes. Although some truth may exist in these complaints, the real and more important difficulties are others. First of all, teachers had no experience and understanding of different ways of organizing teaching and classroom interaction. They sincerely believed that the way they were teaching was the only possible way. They had all assisted Plan- and DEB-organized workshops on creative teaching or similar workshops within earlier Ministry programs and they were familiar with words and expressions such as “communicative teaching”, “student-centeredness” and the like. But all these concepts had either failed in front of the classes they had been teaching or they reinterpreted them to be in conformity with the classical teacher-centered teaching they practiced themselves. For some interviewed teachers, “modern” and “student-centered” teaching was what they themselves used. Other interviewed teachers confessed that they did not believe in these new pedagogical ideas, because “they don’t work”.

Perceptions and Attitudes Towards School in Lao Primary Education in Bokeo Province – page 35
Facing pupils who have learnt to survive through adaption to teacher-centered teaching

A common experience teachers had was that any attempt to involve their own pupils in more active classroom interaction through discussion or dialogues would fail. Pupils did not want to or were unable to engage in discussions. On this point the experience of the research team from the conversations in Grade 5, from pupils’ interviews and from an experimental lesson that was filmed for the workshop at the end of the field work, confirms that the traditional teaching to which pupils have been exposed during their whole school career in fact does represent a problem for teachers who want to change teaching. Pupils have to be gradually used to a classroom interaction where they can participate more actively. For most pupils it is for example difficult to understand that a question asked to them is an open question with different possible answers. This is so because all questions they have met in school have been closed questions.

Similarly, teachers who had tried to change their teaching after participating in the above mentioned workshops complained that pupils were unable to engage in discussions in the classroom. Much in the same way, Grade 5 pupils who have never experienced something like a genuine discussion with a teacher on topics motivated by the curriculum cannot be expected to contribute to such a discussion if it is suddenly tried by the teacher. It takes some time for pupils to adapt to the fact that it is now suddenly acceptable and also wished for that pupils contribute with arguments and opinions.

In other words, in order to change their teaching, teachers need more concrete experiences of alternative teaching styles than what workshops can provide.

Not knowing to connect experiences and ideas to curriculum content

Finally, lesson observations and teacher interviews confirm that teachers normally are inexperienced in and unable to connect a multitude of experiences and ideas about a given topic to what is said about this topic in the curriculum and textbook. In other words, teachers normally lack one of the most important teaching skills, that of in a flexible way establishing links between new teaching content and pupils’ experiences and ideas. As a result, teachers revert to the textbook in all situations, in other words to safe ground. The main reason for this is their lack of concrete experience of this kind of teaching. Concepts such as “student-centered teaching” or “share experiences” get void of content for most teachers, since they cannot themselves connect these concepts to any more concrete aspect of teaching.

An additional factor that contributes to this inability among teachers is probably their often weak academic knowledge of the subjects they teach. They do not know sufficiently to feel safe in connecting the academic content found in the textbook to other kinds of phenomena or knowledge found in the surrounding world that they share with their pupils.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above mentioned difficulties that teachers face are real and there are more such difficulties than these ones. Any serious attempt to improve the quality of teaching must address these difficulties in order to be credible and have any chance of making a difference.
On the positive side, substantial changes to the existing teaching practices are possible without any revolutionary modifications of teaching conditions. First, there is not much to lose. The learner outcomes of teaching cannot be much weaker than at present. Secondly, so much time is already wasted in the teaching and learning process (see above) that even small improvements would have a significant effect on learning. Thirdly, teachers may be socialized into traditional teacher practices that they themselves cannot change, but they most often feel pride in their profession and they certainly have a professional ability to change their teaching if they are shown convincing, concrete evidence that this is possible. Such changes may not represent a revolution in Lao primary teaching, but they can be significant enough to make a real change for pupils’ learning.

There should be no doubt about the importance of increasing the quality of primary (and secondary) education. Expanding the education system through creating more complete primary schools and more secondary school, may improve access to education and is likely to increase families wish that their children continue their studies. This will probably be a positive mechanism by itself, since being reasonably educated will become part of the socially accepted image of young people who grow up. But such input and efforts will not as such improve the quality of teaching and learning. For the future of Laos as a reasonably competitive country and an economy that develops, teaching and learning need to change and turn away from its present reproductive character and become oriented towards creating active, reflective pupils and students. At the same time, changing teaching patterns and teachers’ behavior is one of the most difficult challenges for educational reform throughout the world.

1. There are strong indications from the information collected during the research that in-service training based only on workshops do not have much impact on teaching. Most of the observed teachers had participated in various workshops on what is commonly called “modern teaching”, but their teaching had not changed. Some of these teachers also openly declared that ideas of a more communicative teaching process for many reasons do not work. The problem seems to be that, in order to be convinced that teaching can be structured differently; teachers need to see how such teaching can be organized in other ways and made to function in concrete, real teaching-situations and under real classroom conditions. There is a strong argument for focused pedagogical input into the Plan support. The current support given by Plan is important for the schools, local communities, parents and children. However, the Plan input with some exceptions stops in front of the question of the quality of teaching and learning. It is therefore recommended that Plan in collaboration with the DEB sets up the conditions for creating experimental, model classes in Pha Oudom Primary School where alternative ways of teaching are tried out.30

2. While these experimental classes should be made a concern for the whole school, in order to involve most or all teachers, it is recommended that they should also be given a regular pedagogical support for at least one whole year. Such support could then be gradually phased out. As argued above, under existing conditions and with the existing teachers’ significant changes may well be introduced in teaching practices. These changes will significantly improve both learning and pupils’ attitudes towards school.

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The choice of Pha Oudom is based on it being at the District HQ school and the host of a PA office. There are alternative modes of organizations of school development, for example to use the established cluster school organization. Clearly, in terms of organization, the development project argued for in these recommendations need to be planned with the cluster organization in mind. However, the elaboration of such modes of organization goes beyond the scope of this report.
and continued schooling. This support could take the form of monthly visits of one week by a specially contracted Plan staff member whose main responsibility would be to work with the teachers and with the PA with a view to turn teacher-centered teaching practices of the kind described above into more communicative practices in which pupils are actively involved (see above).

3. Plan already has contracted Lao staff members who work in Bokeo province in areas of community and education development. The impression of the research team was that Plan staff members give a highly professional input in their areas. It is recommended that the proposed new Plan staff member should be contracted in the same way as other Plan staff but on the basis of an adequate recruitment profile related to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. It is also recommended that this Plan staff member, who is likely not to have sufficient expertise in this area, may be trained at site at two or three occasions by a contracted experienced consultant who assumes the role of mentor.

4. It is further recommended that a small number of existing primary teachers in the Pha Oudom area who show a special interest in and aptitude for reforming teaching practices should be transferred to Pha Oudom Primary School in order to reinforce the capacity of the teaching staff to implement and develop these experimental classes. The selection of these teachers is crucial for the sustainability of such experimental classes. It is therefore recommended that this selection is made by the PA, the proposed new Plan staff member and the external consultant expert in collaboration. The selection should not be based on seniority or other similar principles, but on an evaluation of the concerned teachers’ interest in and aptitude for reforming teaching styles that need to change. In order to create better conditions for sustainability, it is also recommended that the principal of the school should be part of the team of teachers who have the main responsibility for teaching in the experimental classes.

5. It is recommended that the proposed input into Pha Oudom district is negotiated at provincial level in order to guarantee involvement of the PES. It is also recommended that the implementation of the proposed project includes the establishment of regular contacts with a teacher training college or school, for example the one in Luang Namtha. However, the initiative for running the development work should not be handed over neither to the PES level, nor to the involved TTC or TTS. In this respect, the proposed Plan input would be considered equal to other running components of Plan support to the Bokeo province.

6. Primary teachers have few incitement to work for changing their teaching. It is recommended that Plan in collaboration with the DEB offers funding for one or two scholarships for teachers who actively participate in the reform of teaching practices. Such scholarships may give the possibility to upgrade from 11+1 to 11+3 or 11+5, on the condition that the recipient returns to the district in order to teach and participate in school development.

7. The last recommendation is of another kind and concerns the recruitment of teachers. One of the problematic aspects of teaching in Grade 1 is the switch of language for many children from Khmou, Hmong, Lameth groups. It is recommended that DEB as far as possible recruit teachers who are bilingual to specifically teach in Grade 1 and 2 and especially so in schools with many children who speak minority languages. If the

31 For example, the young female Grade 4 and 5 teacher in Hangdoy who was the only teacher in the visited schools who had changed teaching in the direction of becoming more communicative, should be given the possibility to further develop such initiatives
proposed pilot project with experimental model classes is implemented, it is recommended that this input should also include training of teachers in L2-teaching in multi-lingual classrooms.
The school as a safe and conducive environment for learning

This chapter builds on general observations by the team and conversations with pupils in Grade 5 in the three schools. It aligns with the third dimension of the school standards developed by the Ministry of Education focusing “school as a clean, healthy, safe and productive environment”.

MATERIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

In terms of physical environment, the three visited schools were neither particularly bad nor especially good. The simplest school in terms of physical material standard was the one in Lung village, using two bamboo made buildings and applying multi-grade teaching in Grades 2 to 5. However, in the setting of the Lung village, there was nothing strange in having wooden made school buildings. This could be compared to Pha Oudom primary school where all classrooms were cement built and no multi-grade teaching is necessary. However, in Pha Oudom, one of the concrete buildings was falling apart and represents a danger to children in its present state. In Homsouk, two out of seven classrooms were bamboo made and not in a very good shape. However, more importantly, none of the schools were particularly clean, in spite of scheduled cleaning every day before class.

Generally, the school premises were not particularly well kept. No clear fences separated them from the outside. While grass in the playgrounds was regularly cut (at the expense of parents through extra school payments), the school yards were not entirely clean from litter. The Pha Oudom School distinguished itself by the flowers planted outside the school building. In all three schools, the school yards occupied a large area, and represented an asset in that sense. Potentially, they could be used better (see recommendations).

A positive aspect is that in some classrooms children’s drawings and art works were put on the walls and ceilings (especially in Lung and Homsouk). In some classrooms, the teacher’s desk had been moved from its traditional location in front of the blackboard, thus favoring that the teacher moved around more often among students. In Hangdoy, multi-grade teaching in Grade 4 and 5 was given in a classroom with two opposing blackboards, which facilitated teaching and learning.

Moreover, in no school any well-organized store room could be found. Instead existing school material was normally put in the principal’s office or in an annexed room, but in no particular order. No school had arranged anything like a school library or reading room.

While the Lung school was the only one not having latrines, pupils in Homsouk and Pha Oudom appeared not to be using the ones existing in the premises. One reason, but not the only one, was that the latrines seldom had water.

Seen in the perspective of the SoQ’s mentioning of “healthy, safe and protective environments”, as well as of the perspective of a conducive learning environment, the physical school environment could probably be improved with small measures.
VIOLANCE IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The worldwide campaign “Learn without fear” focuses the reduction of violence and discrimination in schools. Likewise, the Terms of reference for the present study emphasize the need for knowledge on the same matters, pointing especially at three forms of violence – bullying, corporal punishment and sexual abuse. As previously mentioned in the Introduction, corporal punishment is considered illegal under article 27 of the Act on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children. In the country report in conjunction with the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment, the Lao government states that this law means that that all forms of corporal punishment are prohibited in educational institutions.32

Physical punishments

In the interviews, all stakeholders – pupils, teachers, parents and other villagers – state that corporal punishments in the form of teachers hitting and spanking pupils have been abandoned. The disappearance of physical punishments was also often mentioned by parents when they were invited to compare school today with school during their own period of schooling. Some parents even thought it had gone too far. “It is so noisy; a little discipline does not hurt” or “Now the teacher gets angry and that’s it!” were common remarks.

However, this change does not mean that using corporal punishment for establishing discipline or correcting pupils is entirely abandoned. Interviews and conversations with Grade five pupils in the three schools revealed that other forms of corporal punishment are sometimes applied. The most common ones were running around the school (according to some pupils five rounds for boys and three for girls), singing a song or dancing in front of class. It should be mentioned that singing a song and dancing could be used by teachers in a playful, agreeable manner, for example in conjunction with arranged competitions in the class where the loosing team had to sing a song. But with other teachers the same phenomena could be used for blaming individual pupils. The most humiliating, but also the most rarely used, form of physical punishment was to stand on one leg with the arms out in front of class. A common replacement for physical forms of correction seemed to be giving extra homework. It should be mentioned that all these kinds of disciplinary measures were taken after repeated events of incorrect behavior from pupils, not single events. Teachers always started by verbal corrections.

In Pha Oudom School, surprisingly, the school and the parents’ committee had agreed to school “rules”, announced at the wall of one of the classrooms, that made it acceptable for teachers to use “hitting” as physical punishment, when no other means of correcting bad behavior remained. According to this rule a pupil had three chances to correct wrong behavior, but when these chances had been used, the teacher could “hit” the pupil. However, the principal assured that this rule had never been applied.

One interviewed family claimed that in lower secondary school, which one child attended, students started the school year with a given score for moral behavioral. Each time a student made something wrong, scores were reduced. When a specific low point was reached, the family of the student had to pay a fine to the school. However, it was difficult to verify this information.

Events that triggered punishment of some kind were “coming late”, “being absent without legitimate reason”, “disturbing class”, and “not having done the homework”. In most cases coming late implied waiting outside the classroom until next session, while in some schools pupils could always enter the classroom even if they were late.

However, pupils also reported that teachers could punish or ridicule them for “not knowing” or “making mistakes” in relation to exercises. The line was sometimes fine between not having made homework and not knowing how to solve a mathematical item or read a text properly. In such cases teachers overstepped the line that separates unwished behavior from having learning difficulties.

In general pupils accepted to be corrected when disturbing, but they wished all kinds of physical punishments to disappear etc., in particular the most rarely applied one of one-leg standing. They also wished song singing and dancing to go away when these were not part of game playing in the classroom.

**“Strict” teachers and yelling voices**

The research team could also observe teacher behavior that pupils in the conversations referred when they distinguished “strict” or “severe” teachers from “kind” ones. Some teachers, especially in specific situations, could address pupils in a harsh, commando-like, yelling voice, as if they were addressing soldiers or prisoners. This more rarely happened during the observed lessons, but more often during breaks, when pupils entered the classroom or during cleaning. For unknown reasons, the commando-like voice often came to be used at the occasion of flag hoisting on Monday mornings, when teachers often made speeches to pupils in the school yard. Especially for young preschool children, these events could turn into not so happy experiences of discipline and correction.

Possibly, this harsh, military-styled attitude towards pupils depends on the social context of the relation between the school teachers and the local community. In Lung village, the few teachers were more or less obliged to live in a harmonic, respectful relationship to the villagers. They lived close to the village families and depended strongly on them for their own well-being. Their relationship was characterized by courtesy and respect, which seemed to be extended to the classroom. In Pha Oudom, quite many parents had an educational level equal to the one of teachers or occupied rather important social positions in the community as government employees or shop owners. The research team consequently witnessed very few cases of disrespect from teachers of their pupils. However, in Homsouk, where the educational level of the population was normally well below the level that teachers had and where only one teacher lived in the neighborhood, yelling was more common.

These findings both confirm and contradict previous studies on violence at home and in school. The results seem to confirm that mild forms of corporal punishment still takes place in school and that children accept some punishment when they make mistakes thus as correction method but the magnitude of corporal punishment was quite reduced as compared to findings of other studies.  

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33 For example Lao Women’s Union and Ministry of Education (2007) unpublished. “This is my story”. *Children’s’ perspectives on a protective environment in Lao PDR*
Bullying

Bullying, perceived as repeated negative actions of one or more pupils in relation to another pupil, followed common patterns. Girls were more exposed than boys. Boys were teasing and hitting girls. This happened when coming to and leaving school and during the breaks. The girls in Grade 5 at Pha Oudom Primary School had all been called names by boys such as “fat”, “dog”, “weak leg”, “small”, “big hair”, etc. They mentioned that boys liked to hit girls to get them to cry. Teachers did not interfere regularly, but sometimes did, asking why someone cries. However, boys were rarely punished for this behavior.

Often girls could have one or two guardians among the boys. It was also normal that girls protected each other during breaks, quickly surrounding friends who ran the risk of being victims. It is important to note that girls were not merely passive victims; they also fought back. They equally called boys degrading nicknames, “dog” being the most frequent one. In Lung, girls accused boys and boys accused girls of being the ones who initiated fights.

The research team did not, however, observe anything extraordinary in terms of bullying during breaks or when children went to and from school. Much to the contrary, most of the time pupils peacefully, normally one sex separated from the other.

In interviews, teachers, parents and villagers put forward the image that it is normal that innocent incidents occur when children play, but had great difficulties identifying any bad experiences their children had been exposed to. The most destructive incident during the observations actually happened in the classroom when the teacher had left the class to its own; frustration grew by time and pupils started to tease each other. In the interviews, one parent claimed that his son had been bullied because of the poverty of the family to an extent that he refused to return to school.

Sexual abuse was not explored. The team did not have the possibility to establish the necessary trust with the girls that would have been needed. However, in one school, girls spontaneously mentioned that boys liked to touch them.

School rules

The team looked into the school rules partly to enhance the discussions with pupils and partly to trace possible institutionalized forms of discrimination. School rules included prescriptions on how to behave in school, as well as standards by which behavior was judged as appropriate, correct, desirable, wrong, forbidden, or inappropriate. The school rules embedded in everyday life of schooling could be categorized in five categories: relational rules, structuring rules, protecting rules, personal rules and etiquette rules. 34 Regulations in the visited schools were usually composed of ten rules that differed slightly from school to school. These rules encompassed all the five categories mentioned above, from coming to school on time to boys having short hair.

The application of the uniform rule was not strict in the schools, leaving pupils from poor families the option to wear other clothes. In lower grades, uniform was more an exception than a rule, while in Grade 5 the opposite was the case. Children who did not have a uniform in this final grade obviously felt intimidated. One rule at Pha Oudom Primary that had a discriminating effect stated that pupils could not wear plastic sandals. One boy did not understand why he should be punished for his family being poor and not able to afford leather made sandals. Interesting enough, pupils knew the school rules by heart. Even if they had not been part of the process of establishing them, they normally consented to the existence of rules.

The issue of clothes revealed a potential and unaware form of discrimination of ethnic minority pupils in Pha Oudom Primary School in which the majority of pupils are Lao Loum. When talking about difficulties such as poverty, poor performance, having to go to the rice field, not wearing a school uniform, etc., teachers always referred to pupils from the ethnic minority groups.

To conclude primary schooling and school in Pha Oudom district seems to be a rather safe place, if one is to judge from the interviews and observations made in this study. Probably, the Plan-funded workshop on positive discipline had had a positive impact, since it was referred to by many interviewees. Villagers and parents, especially in the district center of Pha Oudom, pointed at incidents of youth violence that had taken place in secondary school, including using drugs and robbing others. This indicates that a closer look into secondary education may be an important task.35

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Two classroom sections in Pha Oudom and Homsouk respectively are falling apart. It is recommended that they are either demolished in order to pave the way for new constructions or repaired. We know that the DEB and the schools have established plans in this respect and it is recommended that Plan supports they are speeded up before an accident happens.

2. Especially two schools (Pha Oudom and Homsouk) had large school yards that would benefit from “landscaping”, that is being structured in areas for different activities, such as football, high jump (that seemed to be the girls’ favorite activity), volleyball court, the planting of trees and flowers. Such landscaping could include the creation of vegetable gardens and the construction of shelters or huts which could be used for a variety of purposes, such as recreation, reading, group work etc. At Pha Oudom, the VEDC had constructed such huts as a contribution to the school. It is recommended to engage pupils as well as the VEDC in this work.36 Further, it is recommended that teachers take turn in being present during breaks. We expect that these two measures would reduce negative behavior between pupils, which still exist even if it is of minor magnitude. It would as well as have positive effect on learning at large.

3. As mentioned above, some classrooms were decorated by pupils’ drawings and art works. Further, the teacher’s desk had sometimes been moved away from the front of the blackboards. An evaluation of schools that had adopted the School of Quality concept37 revealed that some schools had rearranged the desks. Still using the same type of three pupils’ desks, pupils sat in groups. These schools had established so-called learning corners in Mathematics, reading and The World Around Us. Multi-grade classes, as well as a more child-centered teaching might benefit from rearrangements of these kinds. It is recommended that Plan supports a few teachers and the principals of the three schools studied including the Hang Doy Primary School.

35 In the comprehensive Cambodian and Lao studies on violence mentioned in the Introduction the most elaborated stories were told by secondary school students.

36 Pupils in all school when asked if they wanted to add any school rules to the existent ones mentioned that Wednesday and Friday afternoons as well some public holidays should be used to look after the school and class environment.

to pay a study visit to one or two of the School of Quality Schools in Luangnamtha Province; the idea is not to copy but to get inspiration on how to improve their own classroom environment.

4. Plan had provided the schools with a small box of books for reading. For some of the Grade 5 children with whom conversations were held, these books were much appreciated. Still, the visited schools had little literature to offer the few but existing pupils who had an interest in reading. Unlike the situation in richer countries, there is virtually nothing to read in the social environment in which children grow up. Instead, television makes its entry into this environment. This is an additional factor that makes learning difficult, since pupils have few references to other knowledge of the world and language than those provided by the textbook, the teacher and, possibly, television. Since the learning of written Lao (reading and writing) is one of the big challenges in Lao primary schools, the existence of books covering various subjects could help many children’s learning process. It is recommended that Plan expands its input in this respect through creating small libraries at the schools. Not so many books would be needed, but these should be able for pupils to consult or even borrow. Books should cover different areas (such as history, geography, fiction, etc.) and be appropriate for the age of primary school children (for example by using illustrations). At the present state of development, the shortage of information in the villages other than the one related to everyday life might imply that at least some more pupils take an interest in reading. This libraries should be well kept in one of the classrooms but be accessible for pupils.

5. Much in the same way, teachers have little to read and few or no books to consult. Reading culture is poorly developed. One of the problems of teaching is that teachers have limited subject-related knowledge that they can use in order to enrich their explanations or, at least in a future, establish fruitful connections between pupils experiences and ideas, on the one hand, and the teaching content, on the other hand. The existence of a few books in areas covering, for example, the main curriculum content of The World Around US, Lao language and Mathematics, would give an input into teachers’ professional development. Also, a few in terms of content accessible books on learning and teaching would potentially facilitate teacher’s development. This would be particularly meaningful if Plan decided to implement the proposed local strategy of experimental model classes. In that case, the involved teachers could be invited to participate in a reading circle that met monthly together with the appointed Plan staff member responsible for these experimental classes. It is recommended that Plan adds a limited number of books covering both the subject areas in primary education and pedagogical and didactical issues to the small school libraries. Since there is a shortage of books published in Lao language, this literature could be written in Thai.

6. It is recommended that zero-tolerance towards corporal punishment in school by teachers should be strived for. This includes continuing to strive for abandoning the still existing forms of corporal punishment, especially the “standing –on-one –leg”. It is known that corporal punishment interferes negatively with the learning process. It is also known that it is difficult to get rid of its use. Factors that uphold corporal punishment are habit, tradition, customs and familiarity – such punishment has been used in the past, it is widely accepted, it is supported by parents and sometimes even encouraged.

7. Obviously teacher stress is one reason for corporal punishments. Teachers do not know what to do when verbal corrections have been exhausted as a means to obtain discipline (“you talk to them hundreds of time”). There are no radical solutions to this
problem. However, it is recommended that dealing with such issues should be part of the continuous training of school principal and a compulsory part of the school action plan. It is also recommended that schools should develop a formal policy as regards bullying, sexual harassment and other forms of violence between pupils that are now actually tolerated in the schools as long as they take milder forms. This policy should also forbid teachers’ use of physical punishments. It is for example not acceptable that the Pha Odoum School has established a rule that legitimates that teachers hit pupils, even if this rule is never applied.

8. The tendency of at least some teachers to use harsh, military-like language and an angry voice while talking to pupils is not acceptable. Although such language is not physical violence, it represents a psychological violence that should not exist in the school environment. It is recommended that psychological forms of violence such as harsh language should be explicitly forbidden by the school policy recommended in the previous paragraph.
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Appendices

1. **Research Schedule**

Field work schedule, October 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Travelling to Pha Oudom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Tour around to the target schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with the DEB and the District Governor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Pha Oudom Primary School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with villagers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class observations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 5 Pupils class mapping</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Parents interviews in Pha Oudom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Parents interviews in Pha Oudom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Pha Oudom Primary school continuation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with VEDC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Principal’s interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pupils’ sessions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class observations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Travelling to Lung Village</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with village chief</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class observation Lung Primary School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parents’ interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Lung Primary School continuation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pupils sessions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class observations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parents’ interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drop-out interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with VEDC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Lung primary school continuation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pupils session</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Principal interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Returning to Pha Oudom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Visit to Hangdoy Primary School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with Village chiefs</td>
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<td>Class observations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interview with acting principal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Homsoouk Primary School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting with VEDC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class observations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
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<td>Pupils session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Writing day</td>
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<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Parents’ interviews in Homsoouk</td>
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<td>Monday</td>
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Pupils sessions  
Principal interview  
Class observations  

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<td>Tuesday 18</td>
<td>Analysis, report writing, collecting missing statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 19</td>
<td>Analysis, report writing, collecting missing statistics</td>
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<td>Thursday 20</td>
<td>Preparing for half a day workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 21</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
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<td>Returning to Houayxay</td>
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In addition, one week of preparation before the field work and two weeks for report writing after completion of the field work.

2. PERSONS MET WITH

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Terence McCaughan</td>
<td>Plan Laos Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Vithanja Noonan Plan</td>
<td>Plan Head of Basic Education Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Manivong Siborabane</td>
<td>Plan Bokeo Provincial Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Phonexaisack Mathmanivong</td>
<td>Plan Bokeo District Education Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Somsack Maniphanh</td>
<td>Bokeo Province Deputy PES</td>
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<td>Mr. Changpheng Kerd Dong</td>
<td>Pha Oudom District Governor</td>
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<td>Mr. Southonhe Sengyanthong</td>
<td>Pha Oudom Director of DEB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Phengmani Lor Mani</td>
<td>Pha Oudom Deputy Director of DEB</td>
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<td>Mr. Yong Choi</td>
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<td>Mr. Bounthan Hongvilay3</td>
<td>Village chief (Khmu section)</td>
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