

EDUCATION ANALYTICS SERVICE: TEACHER DEVELOPMENT MULTI-YEAR STUDIES

Evaluation of Australia's Investment in Teacher Development in Lao PDR Final Report

Debbie Wong, Hilary Hollingsworth, Prue Anderson, Payal Goundar and Agnes Mercer



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



Education Analytics Service is supported by the Australian Government
and implemented by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

© DFAT

Summary of findings

Overall, the BEQUAL program has strengthened elements of teaching quality.

More time, encouragement and support are needed to continue to build teachers' understanding of new approaches to teaching and assessment, and to incorporate them fully and consistently into practice. A long-term and systematic approach to continuous professional learning is needed.

'It's a big change for teachers. It takes time to adapt to student-centred learning and move from the old curriculum.' – National interviewee

The G1 student literacy results show some improvement after the introduction of the new curriculum, but students need a great deal more time and the right support to meet Lao language curriculum expectations. This was expected at this early stage of a complex reform process, particularly with COVID-19 disruptions to schooling.

Between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of 'high' performing students increased from 12% to 21%. Around one-quarter of G1 students were assessed in the 'low' level across both years. Student performance varied by different factors including province, gender, home language and household wealth. There were also teacher effects – students in classes with experienced female teachers who had permanent teaching status demonstrated better results.

Promising positive changes to student attitudes towards learning need to be fostered.

Study participants observed higher levels of student participation, interest, engagement, and wellbeing, and attributed this to the new curriculum. It is critical for teachers and students to be supported to translate these initial gains in engagement into better learning. This requires a collaborative and targeted approach involving education systems, schools, parents and community.

Teaching quality



CHANGES TO TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

The BEQUAL-supported orientation training, together with the new curriculum resources, led to G1 teachers' increased knowledge and confidence about the content of Lao language teaching.

Grade 1 teachers expanded their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies.

There was a high level of participation in the orientation training. Teachers and principals valued the training as an introduction to the new curriculum. While the BEQUAL Phase 1 approach was a logical starting point to support teachers to implement the new curriculum, study participants consistently highlighted the need for further comprehensive and ongoing professional learning to build knowledge and consolidate skills.

The sharper focus on teacher professional development in BEQUAL Phase 2 design should help MoES meet some of the professional learning needs identified in this study. The findings of this study together with BEQUAL's ongoing program of monitoring, evaluation and learning provide rich data that can support a targeted program of professional learning that responds to identified needs.

KEY FINDINGS

KNOWLEDGE & ATTITUDES



BEQUAL-supported orientation training and new curriculum resources built teacher professional knowledge in Lao language teaching content and student-centred pedagogies, but ongoing support is needed.

New curriculum resources were a significant support for teachers and contributed to increased teacher confidence.

While most teachers were perceived to be engaging with the new curriculum, some showed resistance or were reverting to former practices.

TEACHING PRACTICE



Teachers reported the use of a wider range of student-centred strategies such as pair/group work, active learning activities, and a greater range of resources. But, limited understanding of these methods persisted. Classroom observations indicated inconsistent take-up of new practices.

There was a positive shift towards formative assessment practices and increased awareness and use of learning guides (rubrics). Teachers need further support on assessment.

While there was a policy shift to strengthen inclusive education awareness, understanding and classroom practice, there was no significant shift in classroom practices.



KEY FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHING QUALITY

Engagement in teacher professional learning, provision of technical support from principals and teacher colleagues, and support from pedagogical advisers enabled teachers to adapt to the new curriculum. However, barriers identified suggest quality technical support needs to be more systematic and systemic.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



BEQUAL-supported orientation training provided crucial introductory information about the new curriculum content and strategies. Communities of practice and self-access learning were highly valued, but opportunities to participate were inconsistent.

SUPPORT FROM COLLEAGUES



Technical support provided by principals, teacher colleagues and pedagogical advisers was greatly valued by G1 teachers. The increase in pedagogical adviser support to case study schools between 2019 and 2021 was sustained. Participants in 2022 identified a more extensive range of support provided by pedagogical advisers.

IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS



Support is more effective when coupled with appropriate expertise and adequate infrastructure, such as budget, tools, information and communication technology (ICT), time. Teachers need ICT tools, knowledge and skills.

SCHOOL FACTORS



Shortage or inadequacy of materials was reported as a key issue in 2019. This was less of an issue after new curriculum materials were distributed.

TEACHER FACTORS



Limited knowledge and experience of Lao language teaching, including understanding of key elements of the new curriculum was reported as a key challenge.

STUDENT FACTORS



Low Lao language skills, low readiness for transition to school, absenteeism, and a lack of parental involvement in supporting student learning were highlighted as barriers.



CHANGES IN STUDENT LITERACY OUTCOMES

Grade 1 students need a great deal more time and support to meet literacy expectations of the new Lao language curriculum.

Results from the 2021 literacy test indicated slight improvement in overall G1 student performance after the introduction of the new curriculum, with more students able to demonstrate more complex skills. However, the wide variation in results – nationally, by province, and between girls and boys – demonstrated the significant challenges to Lao language literacy.

The results also confirmed the links between ethnic minority groups, poverty and lower student performance levels in Lao PDR. The high numbers of students absent on the day of testing in both 2019 and 2021 confirmed the challenge of student absenteeism. International research shows the risk of disadvantaged children falling further behind is magnified along the education pathway. Students who fall behind in the early years of school find it increasingly difficult to catch up.

There is a need to support opportunities that build students’ oral language and school readiness skills in both education and home settings. Students are likely to need intensive oral Lao language instruction (for example, 3 to 4 hours per day for at least 6 to 9 months) and intensive stimulation to improve their general cognitive abilities before they are ready for the G1 curriculum. Home also plays an important role in building the foundations for language learning, through conversation, reading and telling stories. Community engagement and outreach is a key part of any reform process that aims to transform teaching and learning.

KEY FINDINGS

LITERACY OUTCOMES



Between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of ‘high’ performing students increased from 12% to 21%. But less than 1% met the expectations of the new Lao language curriculum. Around one-quarter of G1 students demonstrated very low or no literacy skills across both years.

Phongsali had the highest proportion of students in the ‘low’ performing levels and Sekong had the highest proportion in the ‘high’ performing levels. This disparity widened between 2019 and 2021.

Perspectives about how students were performing in the new curriculum were mostly positive.

GENDER EQUALITY, DISABILITY & SOCIAL INCLUSION



While there were no gender differences in 2019, in 2021 female students performed better than male students. This was both overall, and across half the provinces (Sekong, Saravane and Savannakhet).

Three per cent of students had some physical difficulty, and 23% had some cognitive difficulties (mostly remembering or concentrating). On average, students with no difficulties performed better in the test than those with some difficulties.

Students who spoke Lao-Tai at home performed better in testing. The gap in performance between student language groups widened between 2019 and 2021.

Students from higher wealth backgrounds were more likely to be ‘high’ performing than students from poorer backgrounds.

CHANGES IN STUDENT ATTITUDES AND DISPOSITION TOWARDS LEARNING


There have been positive shifts in student attitudes and dispositions towards learning with the introduction of the new curriculum.

Study participants reported improved levels of student participation, interest, engagement, and wellbeing, and attributed this to the new curriculum.

Given the early stage in the reform, improvements in student interaction and engagement are important findings. A significant body of international research suggests that student learning is about more than academic outcomes. Engagement has consistently been associated with a range of desirable outcomes for students, including achievement, academic success and wellbeing.

KEY FINDINGS

STUDENT ATTITUDES & DISPOSITIONS



Case study participants made connections between student enjoyment of Lao language lessons and the new curriculum.

Case study participants linked improved levels of student participation, interest, engagement, and wellbeing to the new pedagogies.

Data suggested an awareness of inclusive education and associated strategies has contributed to greater student participation and wellbeing for girls and boys, low achieving students and non-Lao speakers.

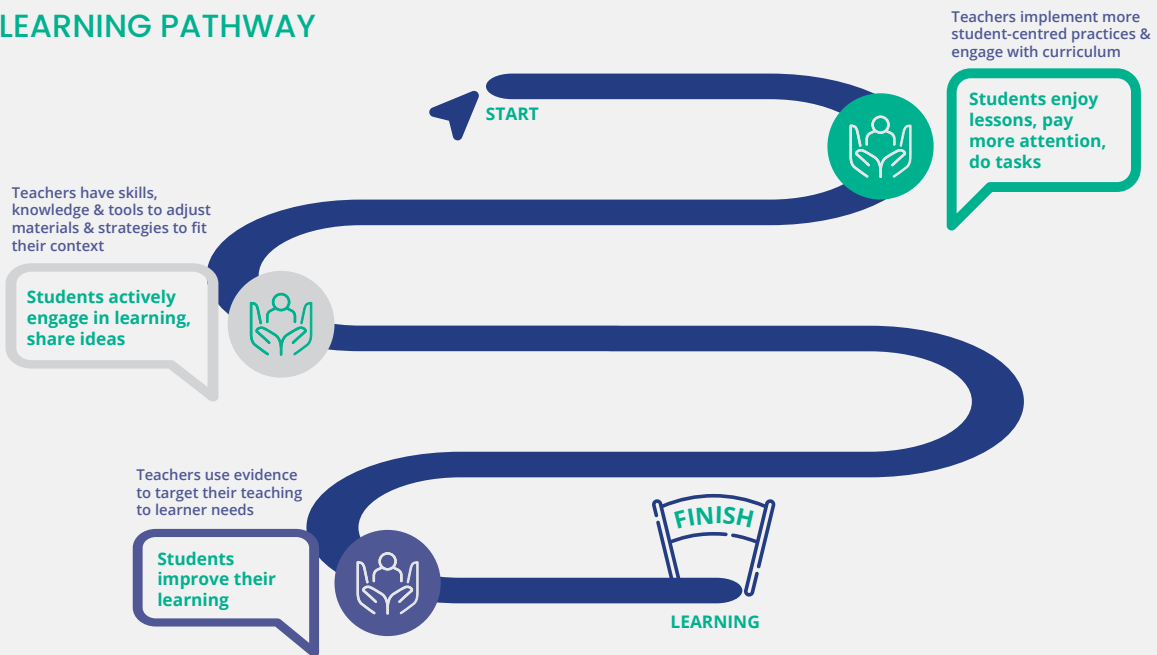
Given the challenges of high absenteeism and dropout, and the need to improve learning outcomes in Lao PDR, the student engagement results are promising and need to be fostered. The study data suggested that the new curriculum supported more students to enjoy Lao language lessons and engage in school, but more needs to be done to support engagement in learning.

'Students are more interested and pay more attention than before.'
– National interviewee

When considering student engagement as a continuum, passive forms of engagement need to be distinguished from more active forms. Examples of passive forms of engagement include paying attention, doing a planned task and working with others, if directed. Active engagement by students includes sharing ideas, seeking feedback, and taking risks. Most classroom environments were observed as 'compliant', with students doing what the teacher said and activity focused on procedures and completing tasks. Very few classrooms were assessed as 'cooperative and supportive', with joyful atmospheres focused on learning.

Student engagement requires a collaborative and targeted approach involving education systems, schools, parents and community to provide consistent expectations and supports for learning. A key part of this is supporting teachers along their own learning pathway, such that teachers have the skills, knowledge and tools to use evidence to target their teaching to the needs of learners.

LEARNING PATHWAY



TEACHING QUALITY AND STUDENT LITERACY OUTCOMES

Certain student, teacher and school factors were associated with G1 student performance levels.

Findings from the 2021 data confirmed known links between student background factors and student performance.

Unlike in 2019, more hours spent per week teaching Lao language were positively associated with higher G1 test performance in 2021. However, the findings also showed that correlations between teaching practices and student performance were weak in 2021, which suggested more time and support for teachers was needed.

KEY FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

SCHOOL



Students at schools with either no multi-grade G1 class or 2 multi-grade G1 classes tended to perform better than students at schools with only one multi-grade G1 class.

There was a weak, but positive association between test performance and the number of school facilities.

TEACHER



Students tended to perform better in G1 tests if their teachers were female, older, more experienced and had permanent teaching status.

Alignment between the student and teachers' home language, if Lao-Tai, was associated with stronger test performance.

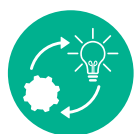
STUDENT



Students had higher G1 test performance when they participated in kindergarten or pre-school, had Lao-Tai as a home language, had more exposure to stories and Lao language resources at home and in the community, higher family wealth, and lower absenteeism levels.

Overall study recommendations

The study recommendations are based on 3 areas of potential policy and program consideration:



Design of curriculum implementation supports

1. Continue to engage in policy areas related to long-term professional learning design, including teacher workforce management and professional learning resources and supports.
2. Continue to build opportunities for coordination with different stakeholders to maximise policy and practice coherence.
3. Support opportunities and partnerships that can build students' oral language skills and school readiness, in both education and home settings.
4. Support further communications strategies that focus on building parental and community knowledge of the new curriculum and the importance of education.
5. Identify priority areas for national capacity building in areas related to curriculum development and professional learning, and ways to support this.



Investment in ongoing professional learning

6. Support the collection and use of evidence to inform continuous professional learning design.
7. Design a program of technical support for teachers that is systematic, systemic and well resourced.
8. Continue to build knowledge and understanding of inclusive education to embed positive practices within the education system.



Investment in collecting and using student learning data

9. Conduct regular assessments to measure and understand student learning outcomes in early grades.
10. Support the interpretation and use of study assessment data to help target investments.
11. Conduct further investigations to understand factors associated with low and high performance, and disparities in student learning.
12. Examine the implementation of formative assessment strategies by teachers.
13. Provide support to teachers and principals on how to interpret data and use data to inform practice.
14. Consider how policy can provide teachers with flexibility to adjust teaching programs and pace to meet students' learning needs.

Visit [DFAT's website](#) to read the full report, Evaluation of Australia's Investment in Teacher Development in Lao PDR, and to view a list of references.

@2023 The Commonwealth of Australia, represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Recommended APA citation:

Wong, D., Hollingsworth, H., Anderson, P., Goundar, G., Mercer, A. (2023).

Report Highlights: Evaluation of Australia's investment in teacher development in Lao PDR: Final Report. Australian Council for Educational Research.