Primary School Dropout Issue in Laos

Gnangnouvong Itthida
Graduate School of Media and Governance
Keio University

The Kobayashi Fund
A Research Paper for 2015
Fuji Xerox Co., Ltd.
Acknowledgements

This paper is a study of primary school dropout issue in Laos. The research is an explanation of how people at the local level make the decision in their daily life regarding children going, quitting and resuming the primary school. The study will not be possible without the various supports from following organization and individuals whom I owe a special debt to.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Fuji Xerox Kobayashi Setsutaro Memorial Fund for the financial support. The support allowed me to do several trips of fieldworks. To do an examination and directly observe the empirical area, to interview people, to listen to their conversation and to hear about their life history accounts. Inevitably, I owe the intellectual debt to a handful people who had given me their precious time and stories. I would like to express my special thanks to the informants (teachers, students and their parents) for their cooperation and kind responding to my question during the in-depth interviews. They have shown me their sphere of life, which allows me to develop of firsthand knowledge about the issue of the research. This provides me a new exploration into the conditions of how strong the formal education through schooling gains a footing among the communities. Whereas, many still cannot afford the choice of children education. It needs to compete with other concerns in their daily lives. Investing in education is not yet a readily option for many families whose lives are base on subsistence way of living. The main concern in their daily life is around how to secure the income of the household. Therefore, whenever they need to respond to the urgent need (income) they need to forgo the choice of children schooling. Besides the common understanding about the role of education as a place where students can be trained academically, school as for the students is a place where they can meet with friends and have fun. Such explorations have shown a great significant gap between the central educational authorities and the individuals. Throughout the process of analyzing the data gathered from the field, I owe the guidance of my supervisors.

My heart left gratitude to Prof. Michio Umegaki for his untiring efforts in instructing me to do the research and proving valuable guidance in determining the outcome of the research. His selfless supports serve as the most inspirational encouragement to work hard and make this the study happen. Similar appreciation is given to Dr. Vu Le Thao Chi who has persistently assisted me throughout the process of fieldwork conducting. She is not only my advisor but plays multiple roles as a friend and a family. For her encouragement and inspiration, I would like to express my gratitude to her.

Gnangnouvong Itthida
Contents

1. Part I: Research ................................................................. 1
2. Part II: Research Outcome .................................................. 6
References ............................................................................. 23
Appendixes ............................................................................ 24
Part I: Research

1. Introduction

1.1. The Problem:

A puzzle underlies in this research is what is the main concern in people’s lives. To invest on children education for their better future or to respond to the household’s urgent needs. Yet, the path toward the former option (education) is often suggested to be the rational choice by educational officials, often harms the latter (household urgent needs). In the rural areas where majority of the people is still relying on what they earn daily in order to live, securing household urgent needs is thus their real concern and therefore sometimes they need to forgo the choice of children education. In 2010, 85,000 primary school aged children were out of school (LFS 2010-2011) and 265,509 children or 15% of the total number of Lao children (5-17 years old) were employed in economic activities (ILO, 2010). Investing in children education as a promising tool for the better future is not yet an option of the many. Moreover, such investment is not only costly but also considered ‘new’ in the remote areas. Besides, it was also found that educational services have not been able to fulfill the unmet need of the students and thus leading them to dropout from schools, for instance: schools fail to provide lessons suitable for students’ learning abilities.

According to the Lao household survey, more than 50% of the parents of dropout students think education is too expensive and approximately 30% of them have no interest in investing on children education (LFS, 2010-2011). The majority of the parents need to compromise their children’s education for the urgent needs of the family. Moreover, besides the schooling cost, the idea of investing on education for a better future insurance is more common among middle to high income group of parents but has not sit well in the mind of parents whose have low income living in rural area. Whereas collecting surplus from farmland and raising life stocks still play the main role in securing the household consumption and serves as one stable source of insurance. Therefore, they are willing to take the children out of schools whenever they need them to help securing the urgent needs of the family.

However, some children choose to leave school because the choice of staying on often doesn’t meet their “schooling” needs that schools are supposed to offer. In 2009, in order to solve the problem of dropout, Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP) was introduced to allow students to proceed to higher grades without final exam. The idea was that PPP would lure the children to stay at school until their graduation and to encourage the students to return to school when they are not occupied without the need to repeat the class. PPP, however, overlooked one serious problem: graduation alone is not strong enough as an incentive for the children to stay in school. Moreover, the absence of remedial classes and other means to prepare the returned children place
these children in difficult positions where they have to struggle in keeping up with the classes and in picking up the contents of the classes. This discourages them to stay on at school and drop out for the second time.

It suggests that education offering associates with low progress in learning resulting in disinterest and eventually leaving. A net result is the increase in dropout and the decline in the survival rate. To provide new insights to the policy making in solving the dropout issue in Lao PDR, the research explores how do they (officials, teachers, parents and students) see the role of education.

1.2. The Background:

Lao’s formal education was virtually abandoned during the political struggles. The country was struggling to fight for independence from French colonial (1898–1954) and then to unify the country during the civil war (1954–75). Only after 1975 when the country successfully unified, education was set as one of the main tools for national reconstruction. The government was determined to place primary schools in every village. Considerable efforts were made to extend primary education to all Lao people including all ethnic minorities, for example, cooperation with the international organizations. In 2000, Laos vowed to achieve the Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) of the United Nation to achieve ‘Universal Primary Education’ by 2015 with specific indicators. First is to increase primary Enrolment Rate to 95% and second is to bring survival rate for Grade 5 to 95%.

With respect to the progress on achieving MDG2, Lao primary enrolment has shown a steady improvement from 68% in 2000–2001 to 78% in 2003–2004, and in 2012 the rate was beyond the target of 96% (MOES, 2012). When examining the performance of the second indicator, there was also an increase from 50% in 2000–2001 to 62% in 2002–2003 and to 67% in 2008–2009. Despite these improvements, the rates still fall short when compared to the target rate of 95%. Dropout Issue represents a great challenge affecting the low survival rate, with annually average dropout rate of 8% (MOES, 2014). What is more problematic is that dropouts directly affect Lao socio-economic development.

Primary school dropout gives negative impacts to the Lao socio-economic development both national and personal levels. This is because in order to have scientists, economists, bureaucrats, or medical doctors, it is necessary to have young pupils moving up to higher education levels. And the primary education is a base of all the levels. Moreover, a lot of dropouts become unskilled workers and this has a negative impact on the Lao national economy. It is because skilled workers plays a very important role in determining labor market and the market in turn is the major source of economy in the country. According to the enterprise survey of Laos in 2009, aside from the high rate tax and the accessibly to finance, inadequate educated workforces appeared to be the 3rd highest constraint of the Lao business environment (MPI and
Furthermore, low education attainment of the individuals also affects their earning capacity. For example, the case of timber processing workers in Vientiane, unskilled labors receive the least wage among the employees. The skilled machine operators can receive up to four times more as listed in the table below.

![Figure 1: Lao PDR Country Profile 2009, Enterprises Surveys](image)

According to the study of the International Labor Organization, it states that early school dropouts often result in child labor (ILO, 2008). As for Laos, 265,509 children or 15% out of the total number of children in Laos are currently employed in some economic activities and 49% of them engaged in hazardous jobs (ILO, 2008).

Currently, although Laos had a rapid rate of GDP growth of 7.7% (WB, 2014), it is considered as one of the least developed countries, with 73% of the population living under $2 a day. Moreover, with regard to the Human Development Index (HDI) data, in 2010, Laos was one of the countries who had the least HDI rank among the countries in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) (figure 3). In 2014 Laos was estimated at 0.543, ranking at 138th out of 187 countries (UNDP, 2014).
One thing clear from this background suggests that Laos needs to improve the education sector, as a means to improve the country’s economy and other development performances. For Laos, the dropout issue represents the difficulty that its educational system faces.

Laos has been trying many ways to improve the education in the country. Decreasing the school informal fee by introducing school blockage program is one incentive to lure students to come to school. The program is to finance each school based on the amount of enrolled students ($6 per student). And another is to implement Progressive Promotion Program (PPP) to allow students to move up to the next grade without final exam. First, the dropout rate improved from 7.6% in 2008 to 6% in 2010; however, it began to increase and return to the pre-policy level after 2011 (7.6%) (MOES, 2011). Another word, the increase in the dropout rate is a puzzle. This neglected issues regarding the dropout problem is examined in the research, in order to provide new insights to the policy making process in solving the dropout issue in Lao PDR.

1.3. The Research:

The following Part II will be the result of the study from the empirical research I undertook in the past several years. The grant from Fuji Xerox enable me to conduct intensive participatory observations of the teachers, parents and students in Pak Ngum, Vientiane, Laos, especially during the period of 1 – 15 August 2015, 13 – 25 April 2016 and 10 – 20 August 2016. The data gathered allowed me to acquire precious findings in addition to those accumulated through the years 2012 to 2014.

I relied heavily on an ethnographic method: participatory observations and in-depth interviews of those who are involved in the formal primary education. The reason is that the research needs to uncover specific context of life which influences children’s decision to stay, to drop out and to resume schooling. There are also some theoretical questions that I keep in mind. These include those dealing with the basis of children’s and their parents’ decision making processes; and those dealing with the processes of socialization that the children develop through the intimate contact with their parents, the peer groups, and the authority figures.
There are two main objectives of the research. First is to explore the reasons of the low survival rate by examining how the key actors in this task (children, their parents, educators from local and central governments) perceive the role of education in their daily life. Second is to re-examine the role of school, more specifically on educational service, in local communities in order to identify the unmet needs that prevent students to stay on at school. The research aims at making the voice of the local people heard to narrow down the gap between the local and the central educational authorities, regarding the children’s schooling problems and the policies.
Part II: Research Outcome

(Below is the reproduction of an article accepted under the review of the Journal of Human Security Studies Autumn 2016, with necessary modification to make it fit in the style of this report)
Whose Decision Matter?: School Dropout Issue in Laos
Gnangnounvong Itthida, PhD Candidate, Keio University

Abstract

This paper examines how individuals make choices in their daily lives. The case in point is the children at primary schools in rural Lao PDR, many of whom often drop out of school pushing down the overall graduation rate. How to secure the basic needs for the family has often been held to be the main reason for children (and their parents, for that matter) to forgo the choice of continuing schooling. However, it is found that many of the children choose to leave school because the choice of staying on often doesn’t meet their “schooling” needs that schools are supposed to offer.

Primary school dropout has been a persistent problem for Laos (low survival rate to grade 5 slightly over 50% for more than the past 10 years). This problem is particularly critical in rural areas where the majority of population is still living near the subsistence level. Unstable income from farm works sometime drives them (and their family members) to migrate to different places like Vientiane and some cities in Thailand. However, that is only a part of the whole “drop-out” problem.

To address the problem, narrowly defined as a low graduation rate, in 2009 Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP) was introduced to allow students to proceed to higher grades without final exam. The idea was that PPP would lure the children to stay at school until their graduation and to encourage the students to return to school when they are not occupied without the need to repeat the class. PPP, however, overlooked one serious problem: graduation alone is not strong enough as an incentive for the children to stay in school. Moreover, the absence of remedial classes and other means to prepare the returned children place these children in difficult positions where they have to struggle in keeping up with the classes and in picking up the contents of the classes. A net result is the increase in dropout and the decline in the graduation rate.

Key words: Dropout, Laos, Primary Education, Progressive Promotion, Choice Making;
1. Introduction

The Lao government is one of the countries, who emphasizes on promoting universal education as a priority for national development. Cooperation with international organizations is one of the tools for Laos to meet this goal. There have been numbers of attempts to expand the school accessibility, to improve the quality of the education and to solve the educational challenges. These challenges include low graduation, high repetition and high dropout rate as shown in the low survival rate, which has been approximately 50% in 2000s (MOE, 2000).

In 2000 at the World Education Conference in Dakar, Laos has adopted the Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2): Universal Primary Education and set the commitments as the national education development goals. The goals were to achieve the primary school enrollment rate of 95% and to achieve the primary school survival rate of 95% by 2015. With the adoption of MDG2, primary education was set as the most prioritized level to develop among all educational levels. And for the first time, the compulsory primary education level was fully implemented (MOE, 2000). As a result, the primary school enrollment rate has been improving from 68% in 2000 to 78% in 2006-2007. However, there have been students dropping out of school, as evidenced by low primary survival rate to grade 5, which had always been slightly above 50% and only reached 63% in 2006-2007. According to the cohort study¹ conducted by the Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos (MOES) during 1998-2011, there were approximately 280,000 students enrolled in Grade 1 in 1998-1999, however only 110,000 stayed until Grade 5 in 2003-2004. This seriously pushed down the rate of student moving up to higher level, only approximately 50,000 in the tertiary level in 2011, as shown in figure 1 (MOES, 2011).

![Figure 1: Students Age Cohort from 1998-2010 (G: Primary Grade, M: Secondary Grade)]

One reason affecting low primary survival rate is the persistence dropout rate. It is above 8% each year for over the past ten years. Until 2010, the rate fell to 7%. But today, the rate

¹ Cohort study by MOES contains the calculation of number of the same group of students who enrolled in grade 1 until grade 5
had increased to 10% in 2015 (MOES, 2015), approximately one in ten students drop out after grade 1 enrollment. This problem is particularly critical in rural areas where the majority of population is still living near the subsistence level (MOES, 2012). According to the interviews with the Lao educational officers\(^2\), the need to secure household economy has been the main reason of dropout issue. And sometimes unstable income from farm works drives them and their family members to migrate to work in different places such as Vientiane and some cities in Thailand, the neighboring country.

Therefore, as a mean to address the problem of high dropout and the low graduation rate, in 2009 Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP) was introduced by the government to allow students to proceed to higher grades without the need to pass a final exam. The idea was that PPP would encourage the students to stay at school until their graduation by making sure that they will be able to graduate within 5 years. This would also ease the economic burden of the family, as there used to be cases who spent as many as nine years to finish the primary schooling.

However, what was found in the research is that graduation alone is not strong enough as an incentive for the children to stay on at school. PPP, on the contrary ends up being the incentive for parents to let the children out of school. Since regardless of their performance students will get promoted to higher class. Parents feel comfortable to ask the students to leave school for sometime to help working at the farm and put them back to school when they are not occupied. The problem is when these students return, schools fail to prepare them to be back to school. There are no remedial classes to prepare the returned children to resume their schooling. This places these children in difficult positions where they have to struggle in catching up with the classes. This led the students to dropout for the second time posting a more problematic issue because when they dropout this time, they do not return to school again.

The research examines the decision making of individuals in their daily lives through understanding the decision making process of children going, leaving and returning to school. In order to provide new insights, for the policy making process to solve the dropout issue in Lao PDR.

2. Background for Research

The current Lao education system has been shaped by the changing of Lao politics in the past. Historically, Laos has gone through many changes (Stuart Fox, 1997). France came to colonize Laos in 1893, in 1902 France introduced the formal education to Laos (Noonan, Phommalangsy and Phetsiriseng, 2013) replacing the temple education where monks were the instructors; providing the learning (reading, writing, literature, mathematics, medical science and basic morals). Only males were allowed to study. The French started by constructing two schools, one in Vientiane and one in Luangprabang, the two main provinces of Laos (Noonan, 2011).

\(^2\) Interviewing the Lao educational official at the central level during the fieldwork (2011-2016)
The schools were mainly accessible for the children of the elites and people who worked for the French administration. After half a century of the introduction of formal education, only 4.6% of the population had enrolled primary school (1954) (Stuart Fox, 1997). Most France-Aid on education was not to expand education access in the country but to finance the Lao elites’ higher education in France (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009).

After receiving the independence from France in 1954, the country fell into a civil war between the Royal Lao Government and the revolutionary force, the Pathet Lao. The United States involved in the political turmoil in Laos and became the main supporter of the Royal Lao government through development projects in Laos during that time. Among the projects, Lao educational sector was encouraged to join the UNESCO conference on education development and review its goal to achieve universal education (Noonan, 2014). Since then there has been more students and schools. Still education was limited to some groups of people because schools were still lacking in remote areas. Moreover, Lao education was also struggling with its low quality. In 1962, only 11% of the students could graduate from primary school (Noonan, 2014). In 1975, 65% of the population aged between 15 to 45 was considered illiterate (Ng Shui Meng, 1991).

In December 1975, full independence was established in the country under the Pathet Lao government. Laos adopted a socialist system to manage its national policy with a centralized command. All the people were encouraged to participate in the national economic development and to be involved in the national building as a whole, President Kaysone had emphasized on the role of education as “the mean to raise the level of knowledge, patriotism, love of the people’s democracy, the spirit of solidarity between ethnic groups and the spirit of independence. The pursuit of compulsory primary education is important”, as a response in 1978, a decree of ‘Universal Primary Education’ was announced (Mya Than and Joseph L. H Than, 1997). What to note is that during this time, Laos was not prepared to accomplish the goal of universal education; the country was facing a serious shortage of teachers. As more than 90% Teachers and other educated people fled the country. There was also a lack of civil servants; therefore the remaining teachers were absorbed into the government administration offices. There was also no enough instructional material and school building, few books were available for students and foreign books were destroyed (Noonan, 2014). Monks were asked to be one source of instructors and many temples provided educational service to people, especially in the rural areas. Lao educational performance was recorded to be poor. Although, the number of schools and students increased, many schools were considered as ‘skeleton schools’ only to formally fulfill the commands from the central government. More than 50% of teachers had only a few years of primary schooling and more than 50% of the schools were incomplete (Noonan, 2011). While there was a serious issue of the lack of teachers, there was only one teacher training school for the whole country; as a result, there was no possibility of providing a six-year primary school. Primary school shifted to be only five years. High dropout and repetition problems have always been the challenges of the Lao educational sector (Somlith Bouasivath, Khamphao Phonekeo, Oudom
Chaleunsin, Khammy Bouasengthong, 1996). Regardless of the obstacles, the government was determined to place primary education in every village of the country.

Until 1986, the economic system was shifted from a central command to a market-oriented model. The government adopted the ‘Opening Door Policy’ for foreign cooperation and assistance from foreign countries to establish the national socio-economic development strategies. In March 1990, UN World Conference on ‘Education For All’ (EFA) was held at Jomtien, Thailand, promoting the basic learning needs of all’. Laos was one of the signees committed to achieve the target of 96.8% of Primary Enrollment Rate by 2010 (from 59% in 1990) (MOES, 2015). In September 1990, Laos also attended the 2nd UN Conference on the ‘Least Developed Countries’ at Paris, the conference announced that ‘the least developed countries have the responsibility for the formulation of appropriate policies for their growth and development’ (UN, 1990). Accordingly Laos targeted to achieve 7% of GDP growth by 1995 from 4% in 1990. The two goals commitments were purposed in the 3rd Five Year Socio-Economic Development Plan and approved at the 5th party congress in 1991. To collaborate with the new reform of the economic development, education was set as the tool to increase the GDP growth (MOPI, 1996).

However, according to the 1992 employment survey, the scarcity of skilled workers was shown to be the main factor leading to the concentration of industrial and service activities only in certain provinces. While in some provinces, a very large proportion of the labor force lacked even the basic skills (literacy and numeracy). The lack of skilled workers was crucial and was the most serious problem faced by the employers, coming before wages and labor market legislation (Yves Bourdet, 1998). Laos needed to prepare skilled labor forces and create the good environment for foreign investors.

Regarding the current development indicators, Laos’ GDP has increased from $1.3 Billion in 1986 to $12.3 Billion in 2014. However, the country is considered as one of the least developed countries, with 73% living under $2 a day, in addition to the HDI rank of 139/169 (2014) (UN, 2014). Education, thus, plays a crucial role as a key for people to be able to participate in the national economic development and make used of it particularly to improve their own household economy.

2.1. Education Development Policies

Following the 3rd Social Economic Development Plan, the 3rd Educational Development Plan was committed to achieve Education For All (EFA) goal of 96.8% primary school enrollment rate by 2010 (MOPI, 1996). Strategies were set to improve the educational sector in Laos, for example, to expand education to reach remote and mountainous areas, to construct the ethnic boarding schools, to promote private initiative in primary education and to improve the quality of education to meet international standards. As a result, primary enrollment rate had increased from 58% in 1992 to 75% in 2000 (UN, 2008). However, approximately 50% of the schools were still
incomplete giving students difficulties on completing the 5 years schooling. Furthermore, the education quality improvement could not be fully implemented because of the lack of resources and the lack of quality causing by the unskilled teachers and their teaching practices (Noonan, 2013).

The joining of Laos the UN World Education Forum in Dakar and signed the MDG2, Universal Primary Education, where committed to achieve two main indicators by 2015. The first goal was to increase the primary enrollment rate to 95%. The second goal was to bring the survival rate for grade 5 to 95%. The commitments, there were more supports from international organizations, since 2000 international grants has been increasing from less than $2 million in 2000 to more than $10 million in 2006. Regarding, the performance of the primary education during this time, school enrollment rate increased from 75% in 2000 to 84% in 2006. Repetition and dropout however were the problems affecting the survival rate, between 2005 and 2006. 33% of the students repeated grade 1 and 20% repeated grade 5. 12.5% of the enrolled students dropped out after grade 1 in 2006. In 2006 the survival rate thus was recorded to be only 57% (MOE, 2009).

The grants on education went up to $20 million in 2010, which is the outcome of the signing of the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2006 between the Lao government and the foreign organization development partners (UNDP, 2007). The declaration sought to increase the role of the international donors to become ‘partnership’ sharing mutual cooperation, accountabilities as well as playing the role of advising the educational development plans. For instance, in 2009 the Educational Sector Development Plan (ESDP) on primary education improvement was formed. Three main areas were to be reformed. First was to expand equitable access, second was to improve the quality and third, to reduce the dropout rate and lower the repetition rate of the primary school level.

A. Expansion of the equitable access

The equitable access was promoted through four main strategies. One of the strategies was the introduction of school block grant to offset the informal fee that school used to ask from the parents. Second was a scholarship to support children from poor financial condition families. Third was to form a multi-grade class in the incomplete school, so that the students could complete the 5 years primary schooling in these schools. The last one was the need to ensure the access to education for both genders.

In reality, according to the Education Sector Development Plan 2016-2020, the strategies set however were not fully implemented due to the problem of budget allocation and the incompatibility with the real situation at the local community. First the school block grant was recorded to be delayed and insufficient ($6 per student per year) to cover schools’ basic needs such as purchases of utility and teaching materials. Therefore, many schools still continue asking parents for contribution. The strategy of giving scholarship to students from poor
families is delayed due to the issue of channeling of community grants has not been taken place.

On the other hand, the implementation of the multi-grades class although can secure that students will be able to enroll all the 5 grades and has more possibility to graduate, the quality still needs to be questioned. The remaining problem of low quality as shown in the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) in 2006–2007, in Lao language slightly three-quarters of grade 5 students were at a functional level (78.5% in 2006 and 77.5% in 2007). In mathematics, nearly half of grade 5 students performed badly equivalent to grade 2 (49.1% in 2007). Therefore, mixing the grades could worsen the learning quality of the students.

Lastly, on the part of the gender parity, there is no specific gender promotion policy. According to the interview with the educational authority at the district level, it was found that the local authority (the head of the village, village’s youth and women union) has been playing an important role in promoting the benefit of girl schooling. Regarding the gender disparity of school enrollment, the rate has not shown to be problematic. Female rate of primary school enrollment has increased from 85% in 2000 to 92% in 2010. This led to an increasing of the overall enrollment rate in 2014 to be as high as 96%. As a result, the target MDG goal, primary school enrollment rate (95%), was achieved ahead of time (MOES, 2015).

B. Quality Improvement

The government had put in efforts to improve the quality of the nation’s education. First, the instructional hours were increased. Additionally, recruitment of teachers from rural areas also increased. This was to ensure an adequate supply of teacher in rural areas. Moreover, improvement of the school management and the education of the teachers themselves were also focused on. However, despite with all the efforts the outcome did not appear to be positive (MOES, 2015).

The plan to increase the instructional hours failed to be implemented because the teachers lacked the understanding of lesson plan based on analysis on learners’ context and demands. On the other hand, the second strategy led the teachers’ training center to focus on recruiting entrants from rural ethnic areas. Less than 50% of the graduates become teachers. One reason mentioned during the interview with the educational official at the central level was that students are privately funded; hence, it is difficult to trace them after their graduation. Lastly, the third strategy to strengthen school management and delivery of teacher education, the difficulty of the task was the lack of leadership skill of the principle teachers, effective school management remained a problem and this affects teachers’ performances (MOES, 2016).

This could explain some of the factors leading to primary school high repetition and dropout problems, as shown in Figure 1. The decline at the primary education level was the most problematic one, pushing down the rate of graduation and leaving much less students moving to higher classes. Less than 10% could make it to tertiary levels. When looking at the performance
of Laos among ASEAN countries. Laos appeared to have the least graduation rate in the primary schooling among the ASEAN nations in the year 2008, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Primary Graduation Rate of ASEAN Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>121.7</td>
<td>105.7</td>
<td>121.3</td>
<td>106.9</td>
<td>122.0</td>
<td>104.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darussalam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>79.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>108.1</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>106.9</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>109.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>78.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>101.5</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>106.3</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>86.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. To reduce dropout rate and repetition rate

Dropout and repetition issues have always been the problems of the Lao educational development; they become also the main challenging obstacles for Laos to achieve their national education development goals and MDG2 as a whole. As a response, ESDP has formed numbers of policies, including school feeding program and ‘Progressive Promotion Policy’ (PPP).

The school feeding program aims at encouraging children in lower primary grades to remain in school throughout the day. With the program, it is believed that students will not need to go back home for having lunch, which could create a possibility for them to not coming back to school in the afternoon classes. However, the program has not shown a concrete finding if it is effective. According to the current report of the ESDP 2016–2020, the school feeding could not be implemented regularly due to the delay of the budget allocation and it has not been applied in many schools (MOES, 2016).

PPP, as an incentive to lure students to stay at school until they graduate by allowing the students to be able to move up to higher grades automatically without a final exam. To offset the concern about the performance of the students, remedial classes during the vacation period were set to be provided to the poor performers (MOE, 2009).

When looking at the outcome, first the dropout rate improved from 7.6% in 2008 to 6% in 2010; however, it began increased and returned to the pre-policy level after 2011 (7.6%), as shown in the graph below (Figure 2 and 3).
The ESDP educational reform including that of the PPP, represents one among the efforts from the government on promoting primary education in the country. What is puzzling is that regardless of the efforts from the government, there has not been a positive respond from the people. What leads to the increase of the dropout rate and what are the outcomes of PPP are what the research will examine through understanding how do people (parents and the children) make decisions in their daily lives regarding the primary schooling.

3. The Research

The important role of education has been promoted throughout the country. It serves as the most promising tool to have higher and stable income, and have more job opportunities. However, in the communities where the majority of the population are still living under the subsistence level such as growing rice and vegetables, catching fish in the river nearby and raising livestock
(e.g. pigs, cows and buffaloes) as the only source of food security and the insurance of the household. Therefore, investing on children’s education might not be an affordable option. Such investment idea is shared more among parents of middle to high-income families, as it is costly both time and money.

In order to understand the issue of dropout and PPP closely, a fieldwork at Pak Ngum District will serve as the case study to examine how the local people perceive the role of education in their daily context. And to re-examine the role of school and PPP, to identify the unmet needs that lead students to dropout of school.

3.1. Decision Making of Schooling

The important role of education has been promoted throughout the country. It serves as the most promising tool to have higher and stable income, and have more job opportunities. However, in the communities where the majority of the population are still living under the subsistence level such as growing rice and vegetables, catching fish in the river nearby and raising livestock (e.g. pigs, cows and buffaloes) as the only source of food security and the insurance of the household. Therefore, investing on children’s education might not be an affordable option. Such investment idea is shared more among parents of middle to high-income families, as it is costly both time and money.

In order to understand the issue of dropout and PPP closely, a fieldwork at Pak Ngum District will serve as the case study to examine how the local people perceive the role of education in their daily context. And to re-examine the role of school and PPP, to identify the unmet needs that lead students to dropout of school.

3.2. The case study
   A. Research Site

Pak Ngum locates in the rural area in Vientiane and is also one of the nine provinces out of 17 provinces that lie along the Mekong River sharing border with Thailand. It shares similarities with other rural areas in the country of having the majority of the population engaging in rice farming as their subsistence way of living. Furthermore, it has a poor economic performance, limited job opportunities and not enough infrastructure to form industrial farming activities.

Pak Ngum is currently consisting of 50,169 people locating in the suburb area in Vientiane (the capital city), 80 KM from the city centre. Approximately 90% of the population relies on rice farming, the other 5% engages in factory working and migrating to work in big towns (Vientiane or Thailand) and the rest 5% includes students and office workers. The economy was primarily based on agriculture and the economic performance is considered to be the poorest
in Vientiane with the GDP per capita of $580 as opposed to one of Chanthabury District, the main cities where has $1920 (MOPI, 2015).

Regarding, the education performance of Pak Ngum, despite the high primary school enrolment rate 81% (2013–2014), it had the annually dropout rate of 3.5% (2013–2014) while the other areas are around 1–2%, which was the highest rate of dropout among districts in Vientiane. Additionally, the primary survival rate to grade 5 was as low as 65% in 2013–2014 (MOE, 2015) as shown on the table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts in Vientiane (City town Area)</th>
<th>Primary school dropout rate</th>
<th>Districts in Vientiane (Suburb Area)</th>
<th>Primary school dropout rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chanthabury</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Nasaithong</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhottabong</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Saythany</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saysettha</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Haisaifong</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisattanak</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Sangthong</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pak Ngum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Methodology

The research relies on an ethnographic method, in-depth interviews and participatory observations. Ten rounds of fieldworks were conducted between July 2011 to July 2016, in Pak Ngum District, where 175 informants, students (8 schools), parents, teachers and educational officers were interviewed.

C. Findings

Rice farming is the main source of food and income of the population in Pak Ngum. There are two main types of rice farming: rice paddy and ‘slash and burn’ or shifting agriculture. Rice paddy takes around 7 to 8 months. It starts from April to clear the land, in May (rainy season) to plant the rice, to remove weeds consistently for five months, and in October or November to harvest, which is the busiest time of the farmers. Another method is the slash and burn takes place on the mountain, the practice takes even longer up to 9 to 10 months. It starts from clearing the land by slashing the small plants and trees, these plants are left to get dried enough for the farmers burn them and re-burn until the land is completely cleared. Later

---

3 The dropout rate shown on the table is the yearly average rate of Grade 1 to Grade 5, the rate will be accumulated for 5 years to calculate the survival rate to grade 5
is the planting process, then consistently weeding and lastly harvesting. Slash and burn method is known not only to be time consuming but also labor incentive than one of the rice paddy. The farmers and their family members need to settle on the mountain during the busiest time including slashing, burning and harvesting.

One way of dealing with labor intensive during the busy time is to form a cooperative labor force moving from one field to another, however, the original idea of cooperative was adjusted. Members of the group need to be paid by the owner of the field after they are done with the task before shifting to others fields. The only differences of this from hiring the private peasants is that this way the farmers can pay slightly cheaper and can secure the labor forces. Therefore, forming the cooperative group is only an option for farmers with enough capital. Otherwise, they have to rely on children to be the source of labor force.

Therefore, in November of each year, it is recorded to be the time schools have the most absence record of students, usually one to two weeks. Rice harvesting depends heavily on water from the rainfall, the amount of rice varies from the condition of the climate. Sometimes this unstable outcome of rice farming drive the parents to look for job elsewhere. In case of Pak Ngum that shares borderline with Thailand, thus the neighboring country is one of the choice at which people choose to go and work there, letting the children to dropout from school and move with the parents. There has not been the exact record about number of immigrant worker from Pak Ngum to Thailand, because the majority has moved illegally. However, the interview with the heads of the villages (Ban Pao, Ban Mark Nao, Ban Natarm, Ban Hai, Ban Nason) could provide the overall number that approximately 5 out of 10 families have migrated to work in Thailand. The majority usually stay there for 5 months to 10 months and some stay as long as 2 to 3 years.

Although, the role of school has been promoted widely as a tool to secure the lives of the people, as it is the most promising tool to secure the stable income and job opportunities in the future, the current needs seem to be more urgent that they tend to response to it more. For parents and their children at rural areas, besides children schooling, there are also other priorities to take care of, such as the rice field and the household income. PPP, the incentive to encourages students to graduate thus fails to meet the unmet needs of the people as graduation is the only their main concern. PPP instead end up encouraging the parents to take the students in and out of school whenever they need to respond to the basic needs of the family e.g., to help with the farm and follow the parents to work elsewhere. Furthermore, PPP makes the problem worse, by placing the returned students in higher classes without the remedial class to help the students to catch up with the classes. This discourages the returned students to stay on at school and dropout for the second time becomes their only choice. The most serious problem is that when they quit school for the second time they never return.
Reasons of going to, dropping out and resuming school

School for the educational officials is a place for students to be trained academically. Parents are the actors who need to assure that this duty will be fulfilled. However, schools could also be viewed by the parents as a safe place for their children to stay when they are busy working. On the other hand, as for children, besides studying, schools could simply be a place where they can interact with their friends and discover new things together. When they have no need to provide labor force at the farm, they go to school like many children in the neighborhood.

Regardless of the important role of school, when families need to respond to secure the household economy, children need to forgo the choice of schooling. They were asked to dropout to provide labor helping on the farm, especially during the harvesting time, or to take care of the younger siblings and sometimes to follow parents to work elsewhere, especially when the parents do not have an exact plan to come back. Staying together is another priority for them.

However, whenever the students are not preoccupied with the work. They do return to school to meet with their friends and to be back to the environment where they can have fun. It is surprising that actually these returning students are not being mentioned in any educational report before. Therefore, there has not been any policy to support the returning students, thereby rending them with no assistance to resume school. As a result, they do have problems of catching up with the content of the classes. According to the principle teacher of Natarm Primary School, returning students are usually ending up being the poor performers of each class.

PPP, the incentive from the government for the students to stay on at school and the outcome

PPP was introduced in the end of 2009 to allow students to advance to the next classes progressively. Regardless of the results of chapter-end tests and marks obtained in the personal record. Hence, students can move to higher grades. The idea is to encourage the students to remain in school and graduate the primary school within 5 years.

In reality, however, PPP resulted in the opposite outcome it ends up bringing the incentive for the parents to take the children out of school and put them back when they are not occupied. Parents feel less pressure not to take their children to school. This is because PPP has loosen the ‘rules of school’. For example the lack of attention to the student is attendance and efforts makes resuming easier than before. The returning students do not need to repeat the grade where they were, but can be moved up with their classmates.

Keo (10 years old, grade 4) is a son of a family who rely on the rice farming for household consumption. Because the family does not have enough capital to hire labor, Keo was used to be asked to leave school during the harvest time, which usually takes 2 weeks. However, later the parents started to also ask him for other process of the farming. Another case is Dork Huk,
an 11 years old student, her parents were farmers and during the non-cultivation time, they often go to Thailand to do piece job for extra income. When parents go to Thailand, Dork Huk stayed with her grandparents going to school regularly. After PPP, her parents sometime take her out of school and follow them to Thailand. When she was in grade 2, she followed her parents to Thailand and stayed as long as one year. Dok Huk returned to school, without the need to repeat grade 2, she was placed to grade 3.

Despite the interval of their absences, the students were placed in the higher grades. However, there are no remedial classes to support these returning students in particularly and other poor performers before schools start. None of the 53 primary schools in Pak Ngum could provide the remedial classes. Some schools like Ban Phao and Ban Hai Primary School, provided extra lessons during the school academic year, but only the main subjects (mathematics and Lao language). In other schools such as Ban Mak Nao and Ban Natarm Primary School, teachers mainly gave the students homework as a way to improve their performances. Phonemy, teacher at Natarm Village said, parents need to make sure the students do their homework, otherwise, the performances of the students will not be improved.

Although teachers play an important role in promoting children schooling, teaching is one of the many concern in their daily life. Due to the lack of budget allocated from the central government, remedial classes cannot be implemented. This is because of the low paid salary of teachers (80USD to 100USD) that leads them to look for other side jobs such as farming and selling food at the market. Therefore, providing remedial classes without extra payment could be a real burden for the teachers, who also need to secure their household needs.

Regardless of what the officials, teachers and parents are preoccupied, with PPP students are left with minimum help. As seen in the case of Keo, when he resumed school, without planned assistance from school, Keo cannot follow the content of the class and his overall performance has been remaining poor. However, it is more problematic for the students who have left school for a longer period of time.

The majority of the returnees come to school without remembering the previous lessons they had learnt when they were at school. Furthermore, many of them had lost their study habits. Therefore, for them, the materials presented in their new class were entirely new and unfamiliar. Especially the returnees who had stayed for a years in Thailand, they even became accustomed to speaking Thai. As evidenced by the case of Dork Huk, she was expecting to return to school to have the same environment as before, but was exposed to a totally new environment, where she could not compete with the classmate. Finally she had to drop out from school for the second time.

Six out of ten returning students (one and more years of absence) in the seven visited schools, dropped out from school for the second time for not being able to pick up the content of the lesson. Buabane serves as one case study. She is 13 year old. She went to Natarm Primary School. Her parents migrated to work in Thailand when she was in Grade 2. Buabane was asked
to leave with her parents and stayed there for two years. When the family returned to the community, Buabane returned to school, under PPP, she did not repeat Grade 2 and 3 but was placed in Grade 4. However without receiving the preparation to resume, the lessons were completely new to her. After being at school for several months, she could not survive the difficulties of learning. These discouraged her from staying in school and quitting school again and never return.

What was found to be more serious is that when the returning students dropout for the second time, none has returned to school again. Based on the fieldwork, the first reason are the students expecting to go back to the environment where they used to have fun and enjoy staying, which is one of their schooling needs. Another is to receive the learning based on their ability. But with the unsuitable lesson to their level, with minimum help from teachers, school is not a place where they can enjoy anymore and this drives them to have the only choice, dropout. This explains the puzzle why the dropout was not improved regarding the introduction of PPP.

**PPP, a misplaced policy**

PPP helps to improve the overall performance of schools (reducing repetition rate and over-aged students in classes), however, not the individuals. Throughout the academic, there have been actually student’s dropout and resuming school. Without the remedial classes, these students fail to catch up, resulting in having poor performance and get discouraged to stay on at school. Because of this reason, dropout has become their only choice. What poses a more difficult problem is when they quit in the second time, they will not come back to school again. Because of the reason, PPP failed to improve the dropout problem, consequently the primary school survival rate failed to meet the goal of 95% by 2015 with only 78% (MOES, 2016).

4. The Implication of Dropout as a Choice

The Lao government recognizes the significant role of education, i.e., job opportunities and stable income. However, the idea receives little response from the local people, especially from the ones whose lives are based on a subsistence way of living. Going to school for the children and the parents is one of the many things in their lives that they worry about. Their main concern has always been about how to secure the household basic needs. Although, the parents and their children are informed about the important role of education, their situations and conditions do not allow them to reach the choice of schooling.

Without paying a close attention to the local context, PPP, as an incentive to lure students to stay in school, ends up being the incentive for parents to let the children dropout from school easier and return to school when they are not occupied. This is because there have always been a temporary leave of some students to help securing family’s basic needs. The problem is when they resume, schools are not prepared to have them back and students fail to catch up.
in higher classes. When they are exposed to the competition they cannot survive, dropout is left as their only choice.

More attentions were gathered at the educational development goals, which shown in the adoption of PPP. Graduation does not answer the needs of the people’s lives, which the main concern had always been how to secure the household’s income. With PPP the choice to resume and to stay on at school becomes difficult. The real irony here is that the situation of the family is a result of the lack of education rendering them not to have many choices. And the problem is if parents don’t send their children to school, the children might not send their kids to school as well and the family will remain in the circle of poverty, as stated by Torado (Michael P. Torado Stephen and C. Smith, 2009).

The research has a great significance in making the local people’s voices heard to narrow the gap between the local people and the central educational authorities; regarding the children’s schooling problem and the effects of the newly adopted PPP. Education in practice must be contextually defined (reflecting on the daily life of the local people) if it can achieve its stated goals such as raising the survival rate through PPP.
Appendixes:

Appendix 1: Map of Laos and the research site, Pak Ngum
Appendix 2: Natarm Primary School Graduation Ceremony 2011
References:

ADB, Key Indicators for ASIA and the Pacific 2010, retrieved from: http://www.adb.org/publications/key-indicators-asia-and-pacific-2010


MOES, 2011, Educational Statistics and Information Technology Centre, Vientiane, Laos


MOES, 2013, “Early Grade Reading Assessment, Research Institute for Educational Sciences” (RIES), Vientiane, Laos.

MOES, June 2014, “National Assessment of Student Learning Outcome (ALSO) Grade 3”, Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES), Vientiane, Laos.


MOES, 2016, “Education and Sector Development Plan”, Expand the equitable access of problem of the real situation, Vientiane, Laos


Primary School Dropout Issue in Laos

2017年8月 第1版第1刷発行 非売品

編集・発行：富士ゼロックス株式会社 小林基金
〒107-0052 東京都港区赤坂9丁目7番3号
電話 03-6271-4368

Printed in Japan