School education reform in Lao PDR: good intentions and tensions?

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Introduction

1 The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) has a population of 5.6 million with 49 identified ethnic groups (Lao census, 2005), 82 languages, and a predominantly rural population (80 percent). The Lao PDR has a history of being an arena in which more powerful neighbors and colonisers have interfered. In 1954, however, Laos, newly independent from France, set out to build a modern society, but was soon engulfed by the American War (in 1962). Colonial heritage, economy, traditions, culture, religion and gender patterns are important factors for educational development, and current challenges include poverty, language, and geographical inequalities.

2 While studies show that national education systems are globally becoming increasingly similar, it is important to understand how in local practice new influences are negotiated with previous norms and ideas as well as already implemented routines in education. This article analyses how the opening of the country to global donors and markets led to educational reforms initiated in the early 1990s aiming to introduce new methods of teaching, also known as student- or learner-centered education. This article examines how policymakers, teachers and students negotiate between Western influences, and Lao traditions in education policy and practice built on vestiges of the former colonial era, the royalist era, and the present socialist era (Chounlamany and Kounphilaphanh, 2011).

Educational reform: Western ideologies meet Lao traditions

3 When the economy was deteriorating in the Lao PDR, the country opened up to global donors and markets. To access financial support there were demands to replace the
previous strong centralized governing of education with more decentralised strategies, and to replace teacher-led lessons and rote learning with more student-centred classroom practices.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) stated: “Teachers must be managers and facilitators of learning. Research has emphasized that students learn by doing and teachers must plan practical student-oriented activities so that learning takes place” (MOE and TDC, 1994: 2). New methods of teaching included discovery methods and drawing on students’ life experiences, and allowed for local adaptation of one fifth of the curriculum to create freedom of space to develop more autonomous teaching and learning.

In the attempt to reform the education system, measures went beyond policy to include the production and distribution of new teaching and learning materials nationwide: textbooks for every pupil; teacher guides; training teachers about the curriculum; and training over 500 pedagogical advisors for primary and secondary schools.

The Ministry of Education recognises that there have been difficulties implementing new methods of teaching due to reasons such as lack of capacity among teachers, unsuitable curricula, and lack of materials (MOE, 2009). This paper considers additional obstacles related to contextual factors such as school education traditions, gender and ethnicity.

Reform in policy: good intentions and tensions

Educational governance in Lao PDR is still a top-down process. The Lao education system is organised hierarchically, taking its starting point at the highest political level. Although education reforms have encouraged a new role for teachers, the traditionally hierarchical organisation, administration and control of the education system remain in place, limiting the implementation of reforms in practice.

Indeed, teachers have to follow the syllabus because they will be inspected on whether their teaching performance follows set requirements or not. Furthermore, centralised tests are based on the content in the textbooks, which is why it is in the interest of both teachers and students that textbooks are closely followed. Thus, discovery methods promoted in the reform turn into transfer methods in practice. Similarly, the focus on curricula, syllabi, textbooks, teacher guides and continuous monitoring from pedagogical advisors means that these formal frameworks become the core of teaching and learning rather than students’ life experiences.

Despite good intentions, there are inbuilt tensions between how the education sector is organised and the visions expressed in policy. It is difficult to imagine how student-centred, informed pedagogical practice would be possible without local autonomy over form, method and content. However, the Lao education system is hierarchal and form, method and content are, at least implicitly, decided by the system through its organisation, administration, and control. The Ministry itself formulates wishes to move towards student-centred education, emphasising active students and discovery methods. The effect of the system seems, however, to be that the closer to grassroots level one gets, the more rule-governed the system correspondingly becomes, with curricula and assessment models creating a culture where transfer models are more common than discovery models, and where the content of textbooks (which still provide the “correct answers”) is privileged.
Responses to education reform among teachers and students

In practice, teachers and students have started to use new methods of teaching and to engage in student-centred education. Our interviews with teacher-educators and their student teachers show an agreement on how to implement student-centred education, and how it is defined, namely as either group or individual learning. If teachers used to dictate the main content to be copied in notebooks, they now give students opportunities to discuss, share ideas, and search for information individually or in groups. There is also an expressed wish to make connections between subject contents and life experiences in order to make teaching more relevant to the lives of students.

At the same time, there is a continued reliance on old routines dating back to before the education reform. Teachers continue to follow “new”, detailed instructions from higher levels. The main steering documents that have been of importance to our informants are curricula, textbooks, teacher guides and assessment models rather than policy documents and ministry decrees. These still determine how and what teachers teach. Even though governing documents stress students' own life experiences and culture, assessment models mainly focus on content to be assessed, so teachers focus on textbook content. And the possibility of 20 percent local curricular freedom, embedded in policy, is rarely used as teachers lack confidence to break the routines and become their own professional constructors of education settings.

Thus, in practice, student-centred education has created a hybrid including some individual and group student activity, but where teachers have not given up the control of choice to the students. Teachers are still authorities and end every lesson with a summary of correct answers.

Gender and ethnicity

Access to education is influenced by geography, gender and ethnicity. Though efforts have been made to improve education for girls and ethnic minorities, the new curriculum and textbooks for schoolchildren make both ethnic minorities' and women's and girls' lives noticeably invisible.

Ethnicity is an important social marker in the Lao society. The Lao language is one of around 82 languages spoken in Lao PDR and is the mother tongue of the majority group, Lao Loum. It is also the official language and remains the sole language of instruction in the education system, in spite of the fact that about half of the population in Lao PDR has different mother tongues. Children in poor and large ethnic-minority families, living in rural and remote areas, have no opportunities to continue studying at secondary level. This is particularly true of girls who live far away from school and drop out to help their parents work in the rice fields or help with the upkeep of the household. The process of introducing gender issues into education is closely connected with imported Western models on gender mainstreaming disseminated through donor projects. But gender mainstreaming in education is difficult to grasp for local policymakers and practitioners and as such, might not achieve what it is supposed to achieve (Silfver, 2010), i.e. in the short run, increased enrollment rates, and in the long run, an equal society.
Who will benefit from student-centred education? Both teachers and students claim that students on the whole benefit when they can be more active in the learning process. They find that, with regard to gender and ethnicity, power relations between students tend to decrease in smaller groups. Females are encouraged to be more talkative in smaller groups. Those with language problems are not as obvious when a whole group of students cooperates. However, it is worth noting that the way respondents discuss issues of gender and ethnicity suggests an established discourse that positions women as shy and quiet, while certain ethnic-minority students are described as either lazy or hard-working, depending on which group they come from. Teachers also seem to expect less from female, ethnic-minority and disabled students. As a consequence, the teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, construct hierarchies placing the Lao Loum male students at the top.

Perceived obstacles to student-centred strategies are also attached to ethnicity: for students who do not have the Lao language as a mother tongue, old practices where students copy from teachers and learn facts by heart, may be easier than having to find the right answer on their own in textbooks written in Lao. Thus students themselves can oppose aspects of the reform since their results are at stake.

Education reform in Lao PDR exemplifies how local forces respond to global forces. In our case we examine how local teachers and students respond to and negotiate education policies set up as a response to global education influences. According to Steiner-Khamsi (2000), these responses can be understood as hybrids created in local contexts and dependent on former traditions, such as political systems and religions as well as gender and ethnic traditions. In line with this approach, Bhavnani, Foran and Kurian (2003) stress the importance of analysing the local context to be able to understand how global influences become implemented locally, because the culture in every local context is a complex set of lived experiences. In the Lao case, it is also about how Western ideologies meet Lao ideologies and traditions from socialism, Buddhism, and local gender and ethnic relations.

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