

Minority perceptions of primary education

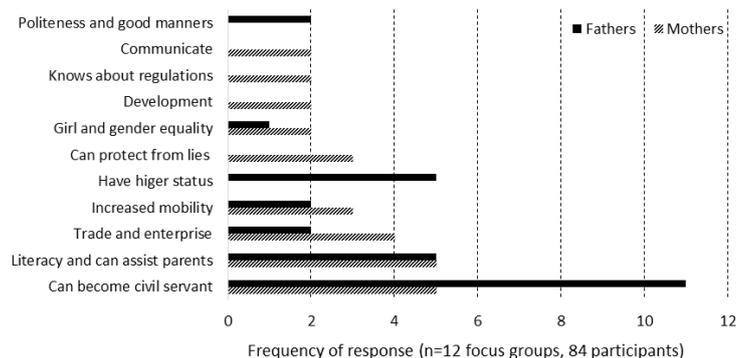
LADLF and BEQUAL conducted an evaluative study in 2016 to explore the extent to which poor and remote households value primary education and are able to support their children to regularly participate and complete primary education. The purpose of the study is to inform strategic and management decisions by the BEQUAL Steering Committee, DFAT and the team implementing BEQUAL. The study describes and analyses four types of contexts: the social or community context, the household context, school context and student context that influence regular attendance and completion of primary school.

The study was conducted in 12 communities in 6 districts of 3 provinces: Savannakhet and Saravan in the South and Luang Namtha in the North. The sample was drawn from the BEQUAL Cohort 1 group of schools – selected for their relatively poor performance. Field work was conducted in 7 spoken languages: Lao, 2 Sino-Tibetan languages (Akha and Lahu), and 4 Mon-Khmer languages (Katang, Makong, Tri and Kado). Semi-Structured Interviews were conducted with teachers; Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) members; groups of mothers, fathers, boys and girls. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with selected households in each participating community.

Perceived value and benefits of primary education

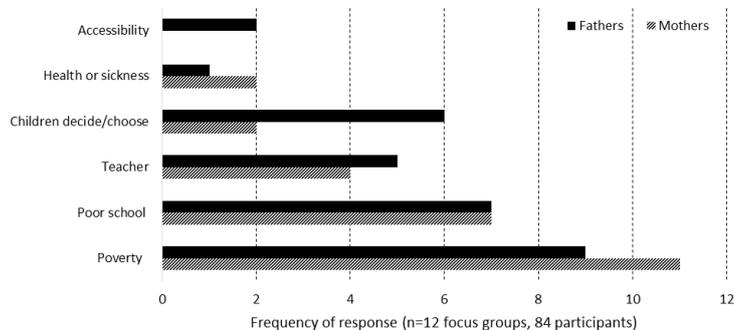
Respondents believe primary education is valuable and of benefit for children (Chart, right). Parents said primary education: provides children with **literacy and numeracy skills** so they can support their parents; is useful for trade; increases mobility; and is the prerequisite for children who wish to work as government staff. Completion of primary education is perceived as an important **pathway out of poverty**; and as one way children from poor and remote households can **integrate into Lao society**, and so take part in this era of development and embrace modernity.

Perceived value and benefits of primary education



Perceived constraints to participation in and completion of primary education

Perceived constraints to participation in primary education



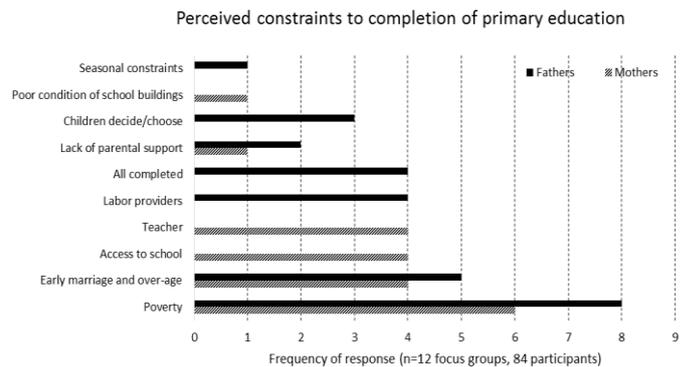
Respondents highlighted diverse constraints to participation in primary education (Chart left). Parents identified poverty as the key constraint – for example resulting in a requirement for children to work during peak labour demand in the agricultural calendar. Poor school infrastructure and the absence of a teacher were other frequently identified constraints.

Parents also said some poor and remote hamlets did not have schools – this **lack of access** to primary school was observed in administratively consolidated villages in Nong, Sepon, Ta Oy, Samouay, Long and

Viengphoukha districts. **Seasonal barriers** include factors such as cutting access due to flooding during the rainy season (e.g. Houayloua and Paliengnay villages); and extreme temperatures keeping students away from school (e.g. at home during winter cold in mountainous Samouay district or along streams during summer heat in lowland Ta Oy, Sepon and Nong districts).

Diverse community contexts demand a flexible response

The study highlighted diverse community contexts in Laos and the influence these have on children completing primary education (Chart right). All respondents ranked **poverty as the key constraint** to children attending school and completing primary education. This questions whether poor and remote households are always able to support their children to regularly attend school and complete primary education. Parents also identified **early marriage** (e.g. Lahu, Brou and Hmong respondents – marital status is a factor impacting student attendance and completion because some local authorities regulate that married youth cannot attend primary school); **periodic nomadism** (e.g. some villages in Ta Oy district); **seasonal farm labour** (e.g. ethnic Lahu people); and home labour from girls (e.g. 100% of interviewed mothers and 71% of the fathers said daily chores allocated to children, especially girls, have no effect on schooling); and **teacher absence** as other constraints to completion of primary school.



The study found a **lack of parental support** for their children's education: 92% of the mothers and 50% of the fathers said they cannot help their children with school work – mostly because they cannot read or write, or are not confident in the Lao language. We asked parents what should be done to enable them to participate more in their children's education. Both mothers and fathers answered that increased financial support (82% of the mothers/29% of the fathers) and more discussion with their children (1% of the mothers/ 43% of the fathers) were top priorities. There is clearly an opportunity to help parents understand how much they can do to support their children to attend school and complete primary education.

Students, especially girls, face diverse demands on their time that compete with education

Several factors linked to poor and remote students' individual life experience have a direct impact on their capacity to engage with, learn and graduate from primary school: limited confidence in spoken Lao language remains a serious barrier to school attendance and often leads to failure and repetition especially in early years of primary school especially P1 and P2. Children who complete P1-P3 sometimes begin to see no prospects after primary school and so drop out after P3 – respondents said they feel that even if a child does complete primary school, there is nowhere to go as parents do not have the financial means to send children to study outside the village, and this is a constraint to completion of primary education.

SSI revealed that one strategy out of domestic work used by girls in some community contexts is to get married so they will have to look after their husband only and not all the people in their own family household. Many mothers said girls should stay at home to support housework. The assumption held by some development partners that women promote their daughter's schooling and advancement has been challenged in the field. KII with female informants revealed that some mothers are in fact the ones who don't want their daughter to go to school as they provide substantial support to the mothers' domestic chores. This suggests that mothers can have a negative effect on the schooling outcome for girls

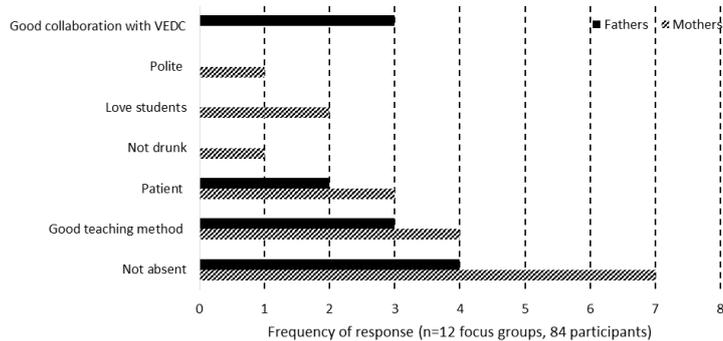
In Mon-Khmer communities boys do mostly as they please and often don't listen to parental advice. Respondents said a child's decision to drop out of school is often directly linked to poverty status as children are shy to show up in school without uniform, bag, pen and books. Teachers and parents said that chronic student absenteeism is wide spread but not recorded.

School context is important

The school context plays a key role in the way primary education is perceived and is a determining factor influencing poor and remote student learning and development. Students are more likely to engage positively with school if they and their families feel safe and welcome. This includes **safe access** (e.g. away from major roads), secure buildings, **clean water and sanitation**, enough classrooms for the number of classes and enough furniture and materials for the number of students. Many schools visited for this study were overcrowded. For example, in Akcheungngay village there are 173 students but there are only 120 chairs and tables. Two to three children share the same chair and even the teacher must stand the whole day because there are not enough chairs. In other schools, we observed 2 to 4 students sharing the same teaching materials. These circumstances also make teaching more difficult and reduce the motivation of teachers.

Teachers are perceived as a key factor in children attending and completing primary school

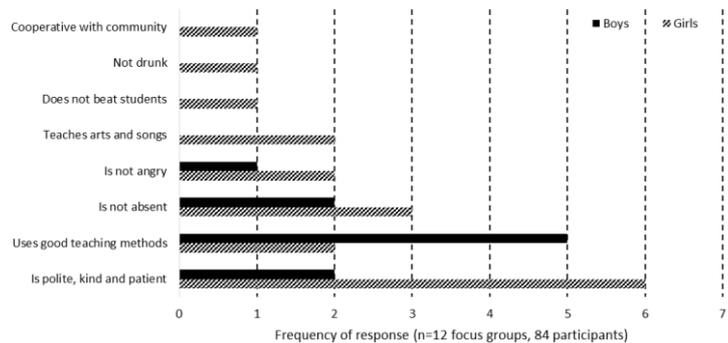
Parent perceptions of what makes a good primary school teacher



Parents had clear perceptions of what makes a good primary school teacher (Chart left). Having a teacher in the classroom was a key factor – the lack of teachers is a key constraint to children attending school. There are many reasons for this. It is difficult to recruit young teachers to settle in remote areas, and there is **high turnover of teachers** who return to lowlands as soon as they get their permanent civil service position (“quota”). Respondents also identified examples of teachers that did not regularly attend school – often attributed to non-education-related duties and unauthorised absences.

Students and parents said that a good teacher is one who uses adequate teaching methods, collaborates with the VEDC and displays patience, politeness and kindness towards their students (Chart right). Girls interviewed said a good teacher should be polite, kind and patient so pupils have a safe and enabling learning environment, and should not be absent from the classroom. The boys said a good teacher should use good teaching methods to ensure that they understand the content of the curriculum.

Student perceptions of what makes a good primary school teacher



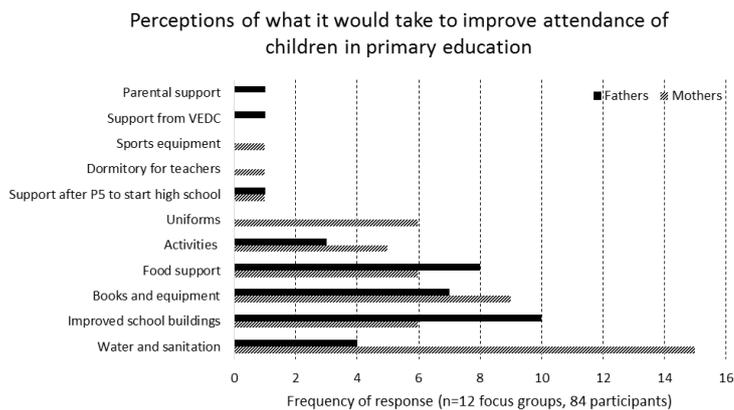
Some regulations and their local interpretation affect attendance and completion

The regulatory framework and its local interpretation can constrain primary school attendance and completion. For example, respondents said that many poor and remote students dream of becoming a teacher or a public servant but MOES Guideline No.1564 dated 20 April 2015 requires candidates for teacher training college to meet minimum height and weight (1.55m and 50kg for males, 1.50m and 45kg for females).

Age restrictions were also identified as a constraint to students completing primary education. Eligibility for primary school is regulated for students between 6 and 10 years of age. In many poor and remote communities, students start late and are over-aged for their class. For example, in the 12 villages visited, 66.8% of the boys and 75.7% of the girls enrolled in primary school are aged between 6 and 10. This means that about one third of the students enrolled for these primary schools exceed the regulated age limit. Over-aged students are able to attend literacy classes, usually provided by the teachers at evening time with village adults, but they are often located far away from the village leading the students to simply drop out of school or other education.

The direct and indirect costs associated with P5 examination and graduation deter the poorest families from keeping their children at primary school to completion. In order to be eligible to conduct the final primary school exam, every student must prepare formal documents including a résumé and a photograph. Some local authorities also require students to pay an examination fee (e.g. LAK200,000 in Laou village in Nong district). In addition, the study found that students are sometime expected to contribute to a celebration for teachers at the end of the examinations. Many respondents said their children had to drop out towards the end of P5 because they did not have money to pay for the formal and informal costs of the examination process.

What will it take to improve primary school attendance?



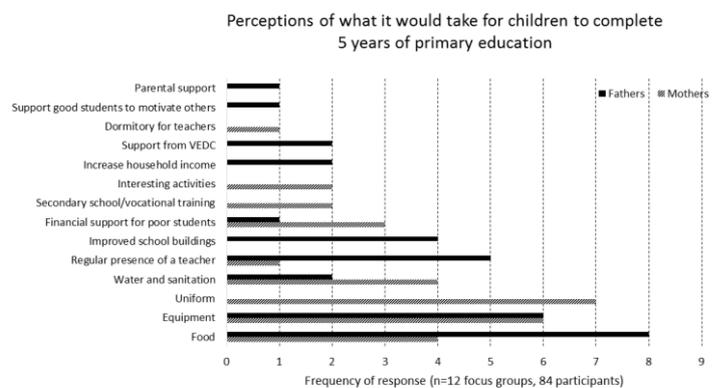
Village respondents said that attendance at primary school could be improved by (Chart left): (1) providing access in remote hamlets using mobile teachers; (2) adjusting the school calendar in remote locations to better synchronise with the agricultural calendar and so ensure classes are taught during the dry season when students, parents and many poorer teachers have more time to concentrate on learning and teaching; (3) equipping schools with water and sanitation, repaired classrooms and teaching materials; and (4) supporting parents and the Village Education Development Committee to motivate teachers and encourage students. There are clear

opportunities to mentor and coach parents, and to provide role models from older girls for mothers, fathers and younger students.

What will it take to improve primary school completion?

Participants in the study identified the importance of food in schools as well as teaching equipment, water and sanitation as factors that motivate children to complete 5 years of primary school. Ensuring that poor families are not required to pay fees or other costs associated with P5 examinations was also identified (e.g. in some Akha villages the village committee covers these costs to encourage P5 completion).

These drivers and constraints affecting primary education participation and completion are strongly linked to household poverty. There are opportunities to address these factors including: (1) directly supporting students from poor and remote households with school materials and uniforms when they regularly attend school; (2) covering costs related with P5 graduation exams up to a ceiling amount per student; and (3) reserving places in boarding schools for poor or remote students based on their primary school academic achievements.



The importance of supporting teachers

Parents of primary school children who participated in this study identified the importance of supporting teachers so that they can teach effectively in poor and remote locations. Suggestions from respondents included: (1) encouraging use of quotas for teachers from local areas who speak local languages to avoid turn over and absenteeism, and also ensure bridging linguistically to Lao language especially for P1 and P2 students; (2) giving priority to teachers in poor and remote communities when Districts allocate teaching equipment, visual aids, posters, reading material, and budget for consumables such as photocopies and fuel; (3) working with VEDC to encourage communities to support teachers with proper accommodation and shelter; (4) allocating more recurrent budget to allow better pedagogical support for teachers and regular monitoring from DESB; and (5) raising teacher awareness about issues relevant to poor and remote regions including the value of local or traditional knowledge and the seasonal and cultural demands placed on children and their families.

9 November 2016 john fargher