

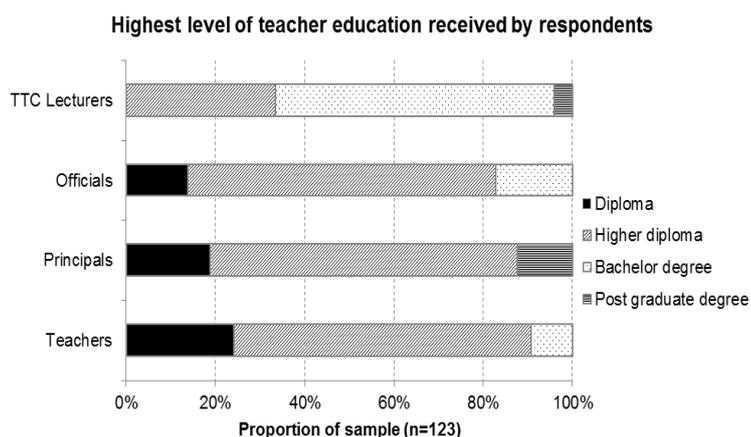
Primary teacher readiness for change

LADLF and BEQUAL conducted an evaluative study in 2016 to explore the readiness and motivation of primary school teachers to change teaching practices. 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 the readiness of primary school teachers to change, the factors that motivate them to change, and the constraints that they face in changing how they teach and what they teach.

Key question addressed by the study

The key question for this evaluative study was: “To what extent are teachers and principals ready and motivated to change teaching content and style so that they can perform as effective teachers?” The study examined the attitudes of teachers and principals towards implementing change and the constraints they perceive to adopting new practices. It considered not only teachers’ understanding of previously taught concepts, but also environmental factors such as community and professional support for behaviour change, and incentives and other personal rewards that might influence how willing teachers are to change.

The study consisted of a rapid review of existing literature, supported by structured and semi-structured interviews with district officials (the head of the district education office and all pedagogical advisors), principals and teachers at both primary schools and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs). The study team interviewed a total of 123 individuals, including 54 primary teachers, 16 principals, 24 TTC lecturers and 29 district education officials (primarily pedagogical advisors), across three provinces, six of the BEQUAL Cohort 1 districts and 18 schools. The study also included key informant interviews with education officials at the provincial and national levels.



The study reviewed teacher and principal beliefs and perceptions about teaching across five categories to assess the likelihood of teachers being willing to change their teaching behaviour:

1. Teacher and principal perceptions of the need to change current teaching practice to improve student results
2. Teacher and principal perceptions of the importance of using different teaching methods (including student-centred teaching) to improve student outcomes
3. Teacher and principal understanding of and confidence in adopting new teaching practices including the use of student-centred teaching practices
4. Existing extent and type of feedback and other support provided to teachers to enable them to change their teaching methods and use student-centred classroom practices
5. Teachers’ perceptions of possible rewards and disincentives for implementing change, including student-centred teaching practices.

Exploring the concept of ‘student-centred teaching’

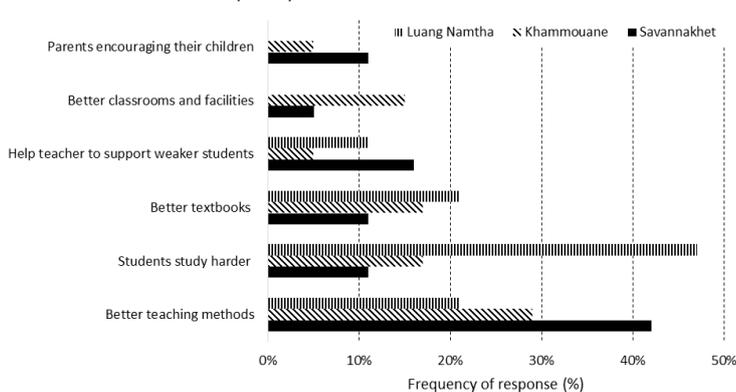
The study used the concept of ‘student-centred teaching’ as a starting point for a discussion with teachers about their attitudes to different types of teaching methods, changes to their teaching methods and constraints they face in adopting changes to their teaching methods. ‘Student-centred teaching’ for the purposes of this study was defined as an approach where the teacher is able to identify individual student learning needs, identify a solution to meet those needs, and implement the solution.

Previous studies in Lao PDR showed that while student-centred teaching is considered important, actual teaching methods in the classroom have focused on the teacher speaking and students' rote learning from a textbook. This study found that while respondents were aware of the term 'student-centred teaching', teachers understood the term not as a conceptual framework, but most often as a specific set of practical teaching activities that they use in the classroom. Despite this, this study showed that teachers were interested in addressing the needs of individual weak students and encouraging more active participation in the classroom, as were district officials, but they did not always have the tools to do so.

Study findings

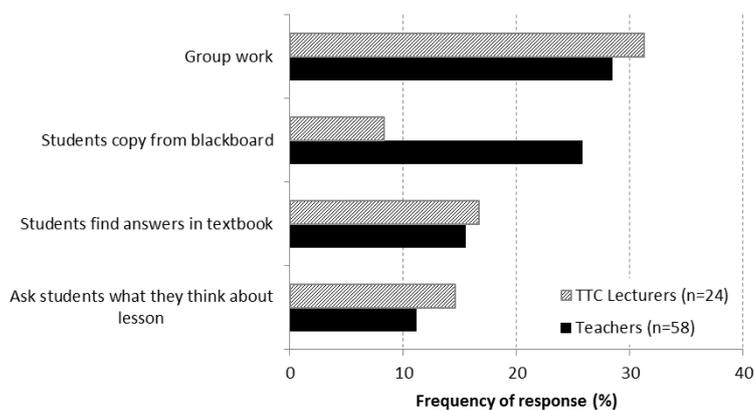
The study found that teachers on the whole believed that **better teaching methods would help to improve student outcomes**. However, in some locations they believed that other factors were more important, such as improving student attendance and family support for their children's education. Teacher absenteeism also emerged as an issue in a number of locations. Overall, teachers believed that students studying harder (including improving their attendance and doing homework) was just as important as better teaching methods for improving student outcomes, potentially limiting the importance they would place on changing their own teaching methods.

Teacher perceptions of how to achieve better student results



Teachers lacked information on student outcomes to be able to assess the success or otherwise of their own teaching methods. The exception was for those students who were successful in 'excellent student' competitions or ranked highly in Grade 5 examinations. In the absence of information on student outcomes or feedback from their superiors, teachers tended to base their understanding of their teaching ability on whether they were teaching in accordance with 'good' teaching practice, rather than on the difference they were making to student learning outcomes.

Methods used most frequently for teaching



Teachers are willing to adopt new teaching practices

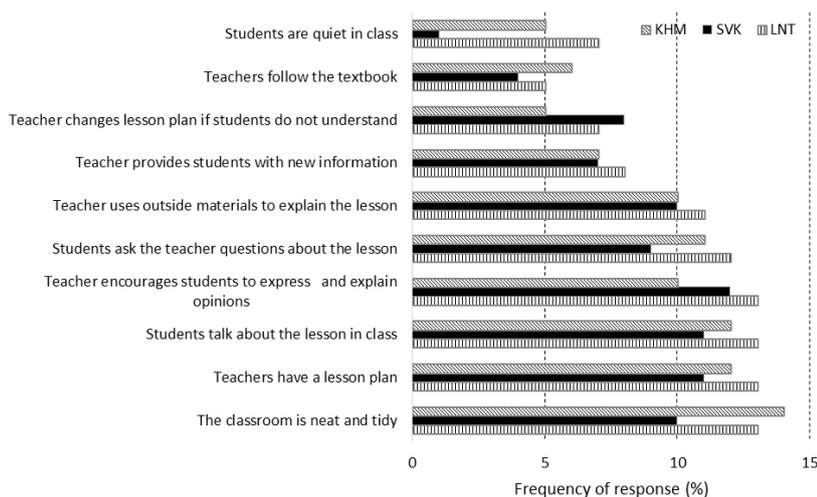
where they have support and see a net benefit to students in adopting new practices. Almost all teachers interviewed had adopted a new teaching practice since graduating from their teacher training college, and cited improved student understanding and results as the main reason for continuing to implement the new practice. At the same time, some of the substantial changes highlighted by teachers were extremely minor improvements from the perspective of an outside observer. Several teachers mentioned improvements to the letter cards they used to teach the Lao alphabet, for example moving from a letter card displaying only the letter, to one with a black and white picture, and from there to one with a colour picture.

The importance attached to these minor changes suggests that a long period of time and a number of **small, incremental steps may be necessary to achieve changes that impact student learning**.

Teachers reflected a **variety of constraints that may impact on adopting new teaching methods**. Such constraints included: deeply held beliefs about whether a new method is 'correct' or not; the teacher's understanding of the new method; the availability of materials to adopt the new technique; difficulties in managing student dynamics in the classroom; or the need for additional work that might be involved in implementing the new technique. Many teachers were **concerned about introducing new activities** that involved increasing student participation because they would take up too much time and prevent them from

completing the lesson plan. Teachers felt the problem most acutely where they were teaching students' whose first language was not Lao or they were teaching multi-grade classes. Limited Lao language in the early was repeatedly cited as a reason for students needing to do homework because otherwise students would not keep up with the lessons. The study also found that the **limited capacity of teachers themselves** to understand flexible concepts about teaching (such as adopting different teaching methods in different situations) would be likely to have an impact on their ability to understand and adopt any proposed changes. Previous data collected suggests that in some places teachers have only slightly better literacy and numeracy abilities than their students and that it may be less in some cases.

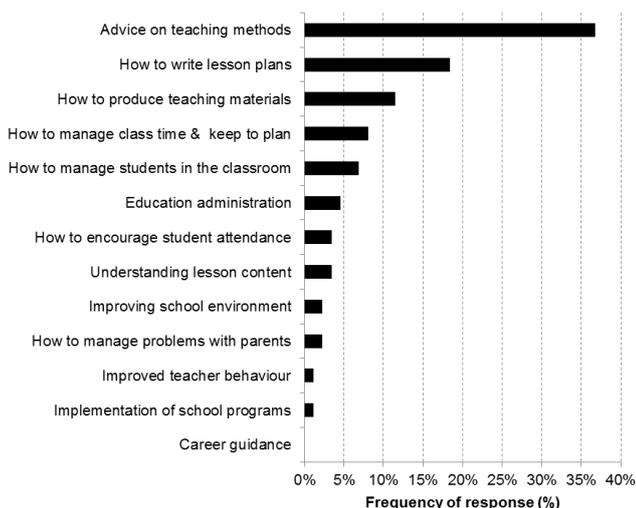
District perceptions of "good teaching practice"



Existing support to encourage improved teaching practice in the classroom appeared insufficient. While a system of pedagogical advisor visits is in place, and teachers for the most part appreciated the visits of pedagogical advisors, changed practice is unlikely to be supported by an average of less than two visits per year. It was also not clear the extent to which visits might be focusing on improved teaching practice *per se*, as opposed to checking on lesson planning or meeting administrative requirements. **The primary source of support for teachers was more likely to be their school principal**, who received regular support in some

districts, but not systematically. Likewise, while a system of awards for excellent teachers is in place, it was **not always clear that the awards are linked to excellent teaching practice**, as opposed to research, administration, or length of service.

Most frequent topics for teacher support and advice

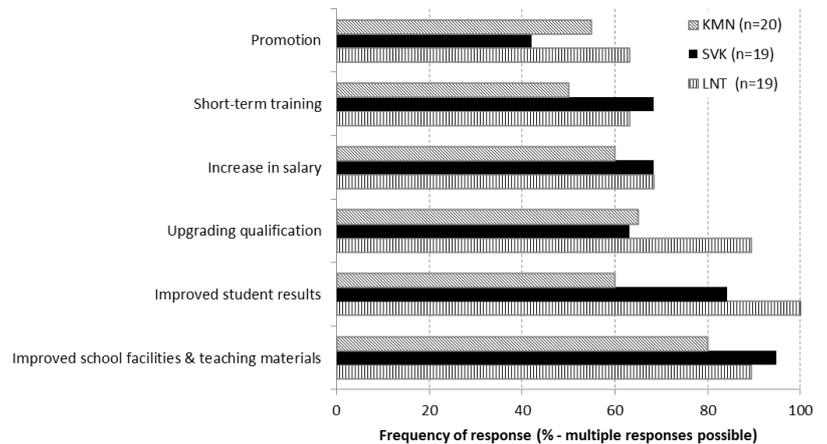


Are teachers and principals ready and motivated to change their teaching so that they can perform as effective teachers? There is no simple yes or no answer. The findings of the study suggest that the answer is better seen as a **complex continuum**. The study highlighted that a **single approach to supporting improved teaching practices is not possible**. Teachers who believe that there is one 'correct' method of teaching and who have difficulty in conceptualising changes to their own practice will require considerable practical guidance and incentives to achieve small steps of change. Those who are already actively searching for new techniques and choose different methods according to the impact they have on their students' learning will require little additional guidance to broaden the effectiveness of their teaching. The diversity of understanding and ability among the primary teachers interviewed suggests the need for both a **simple formula that teachers can**

adopt to achieve improved student outcomes, but **also an approach that provides flexibility and knowledge to those teachers who are willing and able to adjust their teaching practice** to improve the learning outcomes of the students in their classrooms.

Overall the study shows that while teachers are interested in changing their teaching methods, particularly where they can see the benefits on the learning outcomes of students, **the system currently provides limited incentives for teachers to change** and address the results of the majority of students, as opposed to helping the few excellent students. While some teachers are leaving teacher training colleges ill-prepared to teach in the classroom or to accommodate change, except at the most basic level, others are actively seeking new ways to help their students and are only constrained by a lack of knowledge of relevant teaching methods suited to the environment they face in the classroom.

Teacher expectations of change in the next five years



Key findings

Key findings from the study suggest the need for:

- > Greater attention to student learning outcomes as a measure of good teaching practice and as a focus for school inspections, teacher training, and rewards for excellent teacher performance
- > A flexible range of approaches to support teachers in changing their teaching practice suited to widely differing levels of knowledge, experience and capacity for change across different locations
- > Improved approaches for Lao language training in primary schools and teacher training colleges that take realistic account of the methods and time needed to learn Lao as a second language
- > A thorough review of the strengths and weaknesses of past large-scale efforts to change teaching behaviour in Lao PDR (e.g. five-star teaching method) to inform future efforts.

8 November 2016 john fargher