An investigation into how district educational leaders understand and work with rural schools and their communities toward achieving universal primary education in Lao PDR

by

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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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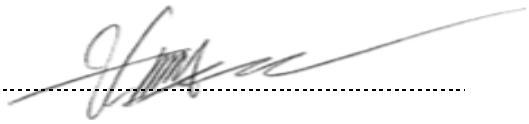
Signed: 

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beloved mother who worked hard for her children to survive in poverty and sacrificed her entire life to support my educational journey from primary education to university.

To my children, Ananthakane and Saithane Pasanchay, who re-energised me when I felt exhausted and disheartened.

ABSTRACT

Primary education lays the academic foundation for all levels of education. If a strong foundation is laid, students will encounter fewer difficulties in their education. Although primary education improvement in rural areas of Laos had been on track to achieve the national targets, there is still much room for improvement in primary education. This study investigates the mechanics of the DESB, three primary schools, and three villages where the primary schools were located.

This project is a qualitative multi-site case study in a bounded context utilising quasi ethnographic methods. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, observations, and document analysis. The participants included six key District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) staff, 12 teachers and principals from three primary schools, three headmen of villages and 18 parents. Observations and document analysis were also undertaken to gain multiple insights about the natural world of the DESB, three primary schools, and three villages. The theoretical foundation was based on Bourdieusian descriptions of field, habitus, and capital (social, economic, cultural) which were used as conceptual lenses in the data collection and analysis.

The findings showed that habitus was very important and determined the way the DESB and the schools worked toward improving primary education and revealed how they viewed parents and students. It appeared that they attempt to increase statistics of schooling outcomes rather than students' cultural capital. The DESB and schools worked under the constraints of economic capital and cultural capital to support the process of educational improvement. Cultural capital was associated with the DESB staff members' knowledge and understanding of educational context in the district. There was also limited level of social capital created among the DESB, schools and parents.

Most parents did value their children's schooling, wanting their children to achieve success, but did not see themselves as important supporters of their children in one way or another. This was viewed as parental habitus, a mode of thinking, understanding, valuing and acting in the education field. Different levels of economic and cultural capital possessed by parents did not determine their children's educational outcomes, except for the children whose parents were employed in the town. What was significant in making a difference in educational outcomes was associated with social capital established at home, which shaped students' habitus. The family social capital referred to encouragement parents gave their children about regular attendance, studying hard, doing homework, and having a future with education. The family social capital was strongly associated

with family economic and cultural capitals and expectations for future success in educational achievement.

This study implies that parents, schools, the DESB, and the system need to develop new models of parental involvement which focuses on parent-student interaction outside of the school setting. A further suggestion is to have interventions for disrupting commonalities or cultural norms that disadvantage rural children. The role of the schools and the system in reproducing the existing social and educational inequality will continue unless there is change in the context of the larger socio-political system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Producing this PhD has been tough. I have often felt frustrated, stressed, and disheartened, and have repeatedly questioned myself about whether I have sufficient knowledge and skills to complete it. Eventually my stressful and lonesome journey has come to an end with the successful submission of my thesis. This achievement and my journey could not have been made without the intellectual and mental support from many people to whom I am profoundly grateful.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DESB	District Education and Sports Bureau
EFA	Education for All
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NUOL	National University of Laos
PESS	Provincial Education and Sports Service
RASO	Research and Academic Service Office
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities or United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund or United Nations Children's Fund
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the research

When I was a child, I went to school without knowing why I had to learn to read, write, count and calculate. I went because my sisters and neighbours were at school, but I had no dream for my educational future or any knowledge of how important schooling was. I only understood that going to school was learning to read, write, count and calculate. It was not essential, as I saw that my parents and other villagers who were illiterate could grow crops, raise poultry and cattle and live their lives happily. When I was in lower secondary school I felt that I liked schooling and wanted to go on with it as far as possible. At least I wanted to be a math teacher of lower secondary school in my local area. My emerging dream may have been inspired by overhearing my teachers talking about their qualifications and life at the Teacher Training College and because I was too lazy to work on a rice farm. As a country boy, my educational pathway to tertiary school was not paved with asphalt or concrete but full of mud, dust, and holes such as poverty, travelling great distances to school, and the influence of local common practices and attitudes toward education which often disheartened me and made me think that a dream was just a dream; it was impossible for the poor. However, with determination and perseverance, education has significantly changed my life from a rural boy, "born amongst earths thrown up by the plough and growing up on the back of a water buffalo" (Viravongs, 2008), to a white-collar worker, with a similar level of socio-economic status and educational qualification to some of those born to wealthier urban families.

Education can change individuals' lives and promote them to be respected and valuable members of society. Moreover, it is an effectual tool to reduce poverty and inequality in societies and provides the foundations for sustainable economic progression (Birdsall & Londono, 1998; United Nations Development Programme 2013). It develops the capacity to be informed, think critically and contribute to achieving other Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly those of reducing poverty and maternal and child morbidity (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015). Several research studies have identified that mothers who are literate can raise their children successfully and contribute to the household income. Women with higher education qualifications are able to keep their infants and children healthy, provide nutritious food for their families, and support their children's education (World Bank 2001). According to data from Africa, a medium to high level of general education is probably the most effective tool in preventing girls and boys from contacting HIV/AIDS (World Bank 2002). "Education also contributes to promoting human rights, protecting

the environment, influencing population growth, and protecting children from hazardous and exploitative labour and sexual exploitation"; "every added grade achieved in school leads to higher eventual earnings" (United Nations Development Programme 2013, p. 55). According to UNESCO (2014a), "education is a fundamental human right for all children, young people and adults, and an essential condition for peace and inclusive and sustainable development". UNESCO (2015a, p. iii) reiterates this statement declaring that education is a "public good" and as such is "a basis for guaranteeing the realisation of other rights". It acknowledges that education is "key to achieving full employment and poverty eradication".

1.1.1 World Education Conference

Due to the vast benefits of education, all countries have tried to achieve Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The World Declaration on EFA held in Jontien, Thailand, in 1990 expected that the universalisation of primary education would be completed by 2000, and identified quality as a prerequisite for achieving the fundamental goal of equity. The World Declaration recognised that expanding access alone would not be sufficient for education to contribute fully to the development of individuals and society. A decade later the World Education Forum 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, extended the Jontien commitments and declared access to an education of good quality was the right of every child. The declaration also stated that "quality was the heart of education, a fundamental determinant of enrolment, retention and achievement" (UNESCO 2015b, p. 189). Fifteen years after the Dakar Declaration, the United Nations (2015a) reported that the net enrolment rate of primary school students in developing countries went up from 83 percent in 2000 to approximately 91 percent in 2015. The number of school-aged children who were not enrolled in school globally almost halved to an approximately 57 million in 2015, down from 100 million in 2000. The considerable improvement has been made in expanding primary education over 25 years since the birth of Education for All in 1990, and particularly since the adoption of the MDG in 2000. However, significant numbers of primary school aged children in some developing countries still do not attend or complete primary school. As a result, the EFA and MDG's education agenda was not fully achieved by 2015. Therefore, the agenda for the Sustainable Development Goal 4[1] (SDG 4) has a focus on the EFA and MDG's education goals of ensuring inclusion, equity, quality education and life-long learning for all by 2030 (UNESCO 2015a).

[1] The Sustainable Development Goal 4 is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. The goal 4 is related to quality education.

In May 2015, the World Education Forum 2030 was organised by UNESCO together with development partners including UNICEF[2], the World Bank, UNFPA[3], UNDP[4], UN Women[5], and UNHCR[6] in Incheon, South Korea, with 160 countries participating. The Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 set out a new overarching goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" for the next fifteen years (UNESCO 2015a). This goal carries on the unachieved agendas of the EFA and MDGs and resolves challenges of global and national education.

1.1.2 Commitment of the Lao Government

The Government of Lao PDR considers education a crucial priority area and an important sector for national development. Since 1996, primary education has been compulsory for all children, and primary education has been officially free of charge since December 2011 (Santibanez, 2014). Some of the Government's major goals of educational improvement include expanding equitable access, enhancing the quality and relevance, and fortifying management and efficiency.

Given the importance of education for the country's development, provision of basic education for all children is essential, especially for those living in remote and disadvantaged areas to improve their livelihoods and their society. To this end, the Ministry of Education and Sports has collaboratively worked with internal and external development partners to extend educational opportunities to all children. Consequently, the net enrolment rate (NER) of primary school children increased by 5.3 percent from 92.7 percent in 2009-2010 to 98 percent in 2013-2014 (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015). The gender disparity of primary NER is minimal (97.6% for girls and 98.4% for boys in 2013–2014); and the disparity gap of primary NER among the provinces was 4.4 percent and becoming increasingly smaller (UNESCO 2014b). Nevertheless, some primary school children are over-aged while a few are under-aged which impacts on increasing the repetition rate. There are some over-aged and under-aged students because rural parents traditionally enrolled their children based on their height rather than their age. The retention rate of primary school students reached 77.5 percent in 2013-2014 (UNESCO 2014b).

[2] The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

[3] The United Nations Fund for Population Activities, now the United Nations Population Fund

[4] The United Nations Development Programme

[5] The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known as UN Women

[6] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as the UN Refugee Agency

1.1.3 Statement of problems

Throughout the past 15 years, even though the Lao government and its development partners have invested in several educational activities, progress is still slow, and the quality is still lower than neighboring countries (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015b). Major challenges in the Lao primary educational context include the poor quality of education, high repetition and drop-out rates, and many who do complete primary schooling have limited functional literacy and numeracy, especially females (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015; UNESCO 2014b). Dropout and repetition rates in Grade 1 have remained high over the years 2011-15 (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015b).

According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (2012), determinants of low education quality include poor infrastructure and a lack of teaching materials. In addition, a teaching and capable human resources department for planning, management and educational delivery, especially at the local level, needs to be developed (Ministry of Education and Sports 2012). Insufficiency of fully qualified teachers and teacher shortages in some disciplines and areas, particularly in rural and remote areas, is a constant constraint to education improvement (UNESCO 2012, 2014b). Conflicting and overlapping roles and responsibilities for sharing a decentralised management between the central and local levels need to be addressed (Ministry of Education and Sports 2012).

The retention rate, or the proportion of the children enrolled at Grade 1 of primary education eventually reaching Grade 5, was 77.5 percent in 2014 (95% target in 2015) (UNESCO 2014b), despite a considerable decline in the repetition rate. The retention rate is lowest in rural areas where there is a lack of road access; amongst children in the poorest group and the children of illiterate mothers (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015). The repetition rate in primary education is a barrier to achieving some of the SDG 4 such as the retention rate and completion rate of primary education. Although the average repetition rate over Grades 1–5 halved from 18.3 percent in 2005–2006 to nine percent in 2012–2013 (Ministry of Education and Sports 2013), it is still far from the national target of two percent in 2015. Grade 1 has the largest proportion (15.3%) of repetition (UNESCO 2014b) with research showing that repeating the first grade often leads to more repetition and eventually the student drops out (Ministry of Education and Sports 2012). Despite the downward trend, the number of dropouts is still high, as approximately 10,000 students (about 5.5%) leave primary education every year (UNESCO 2014b).

To summarise, although there has been significant progress toward achieving the SDG 4 by 2030 in Lao PDR, there are challenges to be faced currently and into the future. To achieve these goals, there must be maintenance of the enrolment rate, an increase in the retention rate, and

enhancement of academic performance. The distribution of adequate learning facilities, provision of capacity building for educational staff at local level, and a sufficient allocation of teachers, particularly to rural areas are essential. Most importantly, a research study is necessary to identify what exactly is impeding improvements to rural primary education and how best to tackle the issues. This study is being conducted to investigate how the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB), primary schools and the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) work toward improving primary education.

1.2 Conceptual foundation

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital (economic, social and cultural) have been employed by many researchers. Bourdieu understands, 'field' as referring to the social world where an individual plays a particular game; 'habitus' signifies a person's disposition that is shaped by one's position in the game or "feel for the game" (1998, p. 80), and 'capital' (economic, social, cultural) refers to a person's possessions that are rewarded in the game. In the discipline of education, while many have utilised Bourdieu's concepts to analyse policy or explore the limitations of the educational policy field, some have used his concepts to explore how schools contribute to producing and reproducing inequality in societies (Eacott, 2010). In this study, the researcher applies Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and the three forms of capital as conceptual lenses to investigate the role of the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB), primary schools and VEDCs in improving primary education in Lao PDR. In the following paragraphs, field, habitus, capital, and the effects of capital on schooling outcomes will be explained.

1.2.1 Field

The social space in which a network of individuals is established for natural interaction is viewed as a *field*. Bourdieu's field theory does not relate to a "field with a fence around, but rather a field of forces that is dynamic" (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990). The *field* can be viewed as social relations between positions possessed by agents (the dominant and dominated) (Ihlen, 2007). According to (Thompson, 1991, p. 14), the *field* is a "structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or 'capital'".

In the educational field, although the game rules are likely to be accepted and everyone is allowed to play, it is frequently the dominant who establish rules and control the game. That is, everyone plays, but not everyone can play equally well, depending on the capital in their 'virtual schoolbag' (Thomson, 2002). In the field, players' aims are different; "some will seek to preserve the status

quo, others to change it [;] ... differing chances of winning or losing [are] depending on where they are located in the structured space of positions" (Thompson, 1991, p. 14).

1.2.2 Habitus

Habitus is a "complex concept that takes many shapes and forms in Bourdieu's own writing, even more so in the wider sociological work of other academics" (Reay, 2004). Mills (2008, p. 80) refers to *habitus* as "the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners" that are unconsciously acquired over a lifetime, during early childhood in family, schools and social worlds. Habitus is "expressed through ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 70). It is a "structured and structuring structure" (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 147). It is 'structured' by an individual's past and present environments such as family upbringing and schooling experiences); it is 'structuring' in that an individual's existing habitus influences their present and future actions; and it is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random (Maton, 2008). This 'structure' encompasses "a system of *dispositions*, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action" (Bourdieu, 2002b, p. 27). "These dispositions are *durable* in that they last over time, and *transposable* in being capable of becoming active within a wide variety of theatres of social action" (Maton, 2008, p. 51). These perceptual and behavioural dispositions are commonly contributed by individuals possessing analogous experiences, with regard to social class, religion, ethnicity, nationality, education, profession, etc. The system of dispositions developed by individuals is dependent upon their position in society, and associated with their actual endowment in capital (Wacquant, 1998).

In education, an important aspect of habitus concerns attitudes towards education. According to Bourdieu (2006), students' attitudes toward education are likely to generate imprinted differences in a social structure. The habitus of dominating classes is an optimistic outlook on schooling and involves "the system of dispositions towards the school, understood as a propensity to consent to the investments in time, effort, and money necessary to conserve or increase cultural capital" and later earnings (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 270). Middle-class families tend to be more familiar with school environments than working-class families (Bourdieu, 2006). Students who come from working class backgrounds have a less compatible habitus which is reinforced by families not believing their children will achieve higher education and have well-paid jobs. Working-class students are likely to have more "negative dispositions towards schools" and thus more tendency to withdraw from school system because they think that higher education success is impossible (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 269).

1.2.3 Capital

According to Bourdieu, capital presents itself in three different forms: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital denotes monetary and material wealth, property, goods, and money; social capital represents social relationships and networks, kinship relationships, membership of a group, and contacts that individuals can possess in social fields; and cultural capital including knowledge, skills, experience, and educational qualifications (Everett, 2002). Cultural capital exists in three states: "in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realisation of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, … in the case of educational qualifications" (Bourdieu, 2002a, p. 47).

In the schooling context, Bourdieu theorised comprehensively about the main school role in reproduction of social and cultural inequalities. Bourdieu (1998) sees educational system as a body where culture is reproduced through invisible relations between academic attitudes and cultural resources. In Bourdieu's belief, although there are ideas of promoting "equal opportunity and meritocracy", educational systems do nothing for the dominated class but allow the dominant class "to reproduce the legitimate culture as it stands and produce agents capable of manipulating it legitimately" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 59-60).

Economic capital refers to financial resources of individuals. The quantity of economic capital possessed by an individual facilitates access to other types of capital such as social and cultural capital. Thus, a family with economic capital can afford to buy sufficient learning materials to support their children's schooling and to participate in communal and school activities where they meet different people. With economic capital, relationships among parents and with school personnel can be strengthened with greater opportunities for participation in activities, without the strain of dealing with family financial crises. Parents with high economic status can afford to buy their children almost anything necessary to finance their children's schooling, and their children do not need to contribute to household incomes.

Social capital refers to social relationships. Relations between individuals create social networks allowing people to share the resources that each person brings to the network. The ability to engage in social interaction and exchange of knowledge and competences is viewed as social capital (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Several research studies suggest that social capital links with students' schooling outcomes (Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013; Israel et al., 2001). Social capital from home

and schools is useful, but "social capital in the family is more influential than social capital at school" for children's schooling (Dufur et al., 2013, p. 1). Different levels of social capital from home and schools lead to lower academic achievement because of insufficient information and knowledge taken to school by children (Dufur et al., 2013). In addition, extensive studies in USA show that the bonds parents create with neighbours and school staff promote children's schooling achievement; if these bonds are stronger, they have access to greater resources (Dufur, Parcel, & McKune, 2008; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Similarly, Pong (1998) discovered that social capital has an impact on Grade-10 math and reading success was an outcome of the effects of individual student's family capital.

Based on the theory of cultural capital on educational achievement determined by Bourdieu (1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), a strong connection between cultural capital and educational achievement can be shown. Bourdieu (1977), who highlighted social class differences in academic success, asserted that schools reproduce the culture of the dominating class in society and that students belonging to this class acquire that type of culture at home and better adapt to the culture preferred by the school staff. A similar relationship exists in the Lao education system where schools expect every child to meet the national standard without adapting the standard to suit rural children who do not possess cultural capital that is rewarded at school.

Cultural capital comprises cultural and social experiences that are acquired from family backgrounds. Social class produces different cultural capital, and schooling systems are more likely to recognise the abilities of middle and upper-class students as a result of their cultural capital (Edgerton, Roberts, & Peter, 2013). Bourdieu (2006) proposes that individuals from diverse social classes understand the complexity and variations of particular social fields differently. That is, poor parents are unlikely to get used to the schooling regulations, cultures, and rewarded behaviours; thus, they are unable to help their children achieve educational success which is different from middle and upper-class parents. In fact, the schooling system, which seems to be superficially meritocratic, continues to prolong and worsen current inequalities because it has an unseen value system that advantages higher status students as lower status students may exclude themselves from the schooling stratification due to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977).

1.2.4 Bourdieu's concepts and Lao educational context

Bourdieu's key concepts can be applied as lenses to explain problems of primary education in Lao PDR. Rural children are brought up in environments that do not shape their habitus oriented towards schooling nor the social and cultural capital that schooling requires. Their knowledge and skills brought from home in their 'virtual school bag' (Thomson, 2002) are not useful in a schooling field,

so they encounter new challenges at school with limited funds of knowledge. They enter the schooling field to play their role just for fun or as a traditional community practice when they are too young to engage in family work or leave their communities. At age 13, most students who have been in school decide to leave the schooling field because the educational journey takes so long to finish and there is little hope for those who struggle with the limited capital required to achieve success in higher education. This is unlike many urban children who possess both a schooling-oriented habitus and schooling-related capital, and who, once they enter the educational field, better adapt to the environment, are more familiar with the school culture, and feel more confident (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, urban children are more likely to outperform and achieve educational success than rural counterparts.

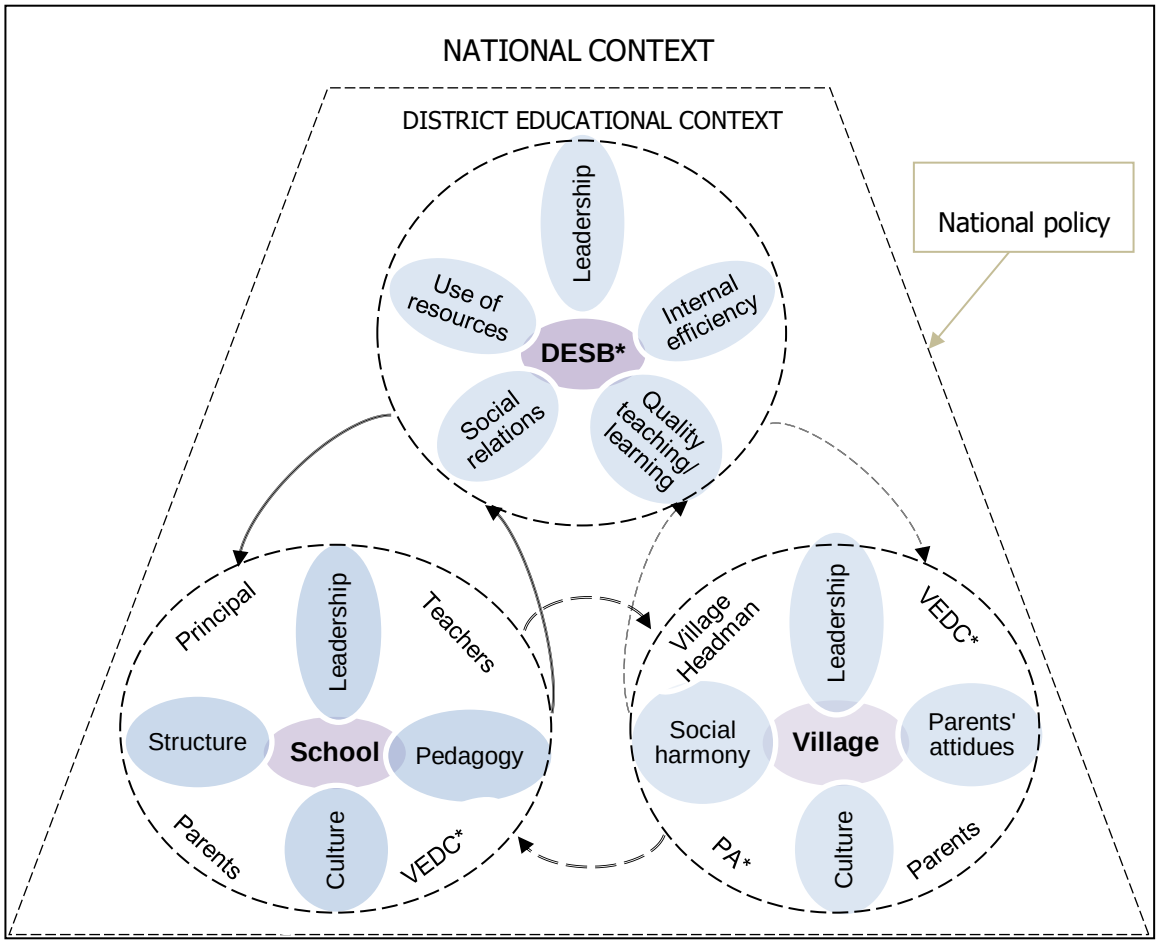
1.2.5 Conceptual diagram

The District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) is the third bureaucratic level of the education system after a Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) and the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in Lao PDR. The DESB takes full responsibility of leading, managing and improving primary education in cooperation with primary schools and the community in a district. Figure 1 on the next page illustrates the district educational context which comprises the three local bureaucratic levels – DESB, school, and community. Each of these three bureaucratic levels is considered a 'field' in this study. The solid line around the diagram represents the national educational context, and the broken line around the three circles represents district educational context, where the national and provincial policies are translated and implemented. The top circle represents the DESB field. Inside the circle around the DESB is capital: economic, social and cultural. DESB habitus is the rational connection between each staff member's behaviours and social structure. According to Khanchel and Kahla (2013), habitus is culture, and like culture; therefore, DESB's habitus and culture include the collective values, beliefs, vision, norms, and habits of the DESB staff.

The bottom left circle represents a school field. In the field, leadership, pedagogy, culture and structure are thought of as capital facilitating agents for the principal, teachers, Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) and parents, to perform their roles. *Economic capital* embraces budgets and salaries. *Social capital* denotes relationships between teachers and their colleagues, teachers and students, students and their peers, and teachers and parents/communities. *Cultural capital* signifies leadership, teachers' content knowledge and teaching methods, professional development, and policies/rules. *School culture* refers to the traditions, beliefs, policies, written and unwritten rules and norms within a school that can be shaped, enhanced, and maintained through the school's personnel. *School habitus* includes personnel's perceptions, attitudes, and sense of

responsibility for student learning. The way students think, believe, act, and behave naturally at school also contribute to the school's habitus.

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram of the relationship and interaction between the district, school and community within the district educational context.



Note: Broken arrows indicate weak relationships between the two stakeholders.

*DESB = District Education and Sports Bureau

*VEDC = Village Education Development Committee

*PA = Parents Association

*Primary education improvement = increasing enrolment rate and retention rate and enhancing academic performance

The remaining circle on the bottom right represents the community/village field. Agents in this field include village headmen, Village Education Development Committee (VEDC), Teacher–Parent Association (TPA), and parents/guardians. These groups are expected to work cooperatively with principals and teachers to construct and maintain school buildings, manage school financial resources, and promote educational benefits. *Economic capital* that agents manage in this field

includes funds, decisions on allocation of resources, and provision of infrastructure. *Social capital* refers to relationships among these groups of people in the field, and *cultural capital* includes beliefs, expectations, values, desires and rituals that influence the way in which individuals and groups of people will interact with one another and collaborate to achieve common educational goals. *Habitus* denotes perceptions and attitudes particularly as relevant to education. The arrows connecting the two fields illustrate relationships, communication and interactions between agents playing their respective roles in each field.

1.3 Research rationale and objectives

Several research enquiries on education have neglected the role of district-level leadership in influencing improvement of schooling in developing countries. Most studies on this area have been conducted in the developed world, especially in the United States of America and Canada (Dan, 2011; Hannay, Ben Jaafar, & Earl, 2013; Leithwood, 2010). Barber, Whelan, and Clark (2010, p. 23) stressed, "many principals cannot be successful without the best possible district leadership" in improving education. In Lao PDR, however, literature related to the district level in the Lao education system and educational leadership and management in rural areas is extremely limited. The policy makers and planners at the central level do not often hear about what is going on in rural schools. A study by Kittiphanh (2011) on school principals' leadership development in rural districts of Lao PDR reveals that often capacity building has been ineffective.

This study is thus a ground-breaking inquiry at the bureaucratic level of the education system in Lao PDR. It aims to investigate how the DESB understand and work with rural schools and communities with the aim to have all primary school-age children in school, remain in school without repeating the same grade, and complete primary school having achieved the levels of literacy and numeracy prescribed in the curriculum. Specifically, the study looks at schools and villages that implement development plans and work closely with children, attempting to bring about positive changes in primary schooling in their respective communities. The last objective is to discover the challenges related to student enrolment, retention, attainment and completion that impede primary education improvement and to examine how those challenges can be addressed by the DESB officers and teachers in schools. This study is expected to contribute to the work of the DESB in pursuit of school improvement in rural areas of this country.

To investigate how the DESB, schools, and VEDCs work, the main research question for this study was formulated,

How are key DESB staff, primary school teachers, and VEDCs contributing to improving primary education in Atsaphangthong District, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR?

Within this question, there are three questions that guide and function as major constituents of the study:

1. How do DESB staff understand the opportunities and challenges of primary education in the researched district?

2. What strategies do DESB staff use to ensure all children in the district complete primary education, without repeating the same grade, having achieved levels of literacy and numeracy prescribed in the curriculum?

3. What are the challenges hindering enrolment, retention, and learning performance of primary school students in the district? How are these challenges addressed by the schools and VEDCs?

1.4 Definition of key terms

Gross enrolment rate is "total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of ….[the official school-age population]… in a given school year" (UNESCO 2009, p. 9). Boissiere (2004) explains that the "usual definition takes the ratio of primary enrolment of all ages to the primary enrolment of those in the official primary age group, typically 6 to 11 years old. As a result of under-age and over-age enrolments and high repetition rates, this rate could be greater than 100%". The gross enrolment rate is extensively applied "to show the general level of participation in a given level of education. It indicates the capacity of the education system to enrol students of a particular age-group. It can also be a complementary indicator to net enrolment rate (NER) by indicating the extent of over-aged and under-aged enrolment" (UNESCO 2009, p. 9). The gross enrolment rate is calculated by "dividing the number of pupils enrolled in a given level of education regardless of age by the population of the age-group which officially corresponds to that given level of education, and multiply the result by 100" (UNESCO, p. 9).

Net enrolment rate refers to "enrolment of the official age-group for a given level of education expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population" (UNESCO 2009, p. 10). The rate "should be 100% or less. … [and] … is considered to be a better indicator of primary school access than the gross enrolment ratio" (Boissiere, 2004). The rate shows "the extent of coverage in a given level of education of children and youths belonging to the official age group corresponding to the

given level of education" (UNESCO 2009, p. 10). The net enrolment rate is calculated by "dividing the number of pupils enrolled who are of the official age-group for a given level of education by the population for the same age-group and multiply the result by 100" (UNESCO 2009, p. 10).

Retention rate is "the percentage of a cohort of pupils enrolled in the first grade of a given level of education in a given school-year who are expected to reach each successive grade" (UNESCO 2009). To be precise, it is the percentage of students who remain at a school until their final grade after they have been enrolled. The retention rate is an indicator of the internal efficiency of education system (Chanthala & Phommanimith, 2004). Retention rate "illustrates the situation regarding retention of pupils from grade to grade in schools, and conversely the magnitude of the dropout by grade" (UNESCO 2009). The retention rate is calculated by "dividing the total number of pupils belonging to a school-cohort who reach each successive grade of the specified level of the education by the total number of pupils in the school-cohort (those originally enrolled in the first grade of the same level of education) and multiply the result by 100" (UNESCO 2009).

Repetition rate, according to UNESCO (2009), is the "proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a particular school-year who study in the same grade in the following school-year. … [It] measures the rate at which pupils from a cohort repeat a grade, and its effect on the internal efficiency of educational systems. In addition, it is one of the key indicators for analysing and projecting pupil flows from grade to grade within the educational cycle". The repetition rate is calculated by "dividing the number of repeaters in a given grade in a school year by the total number of pupils from the same cohort enrolled in the same grade in the previous school year and converting this to a percentage" (UNESCO 2009, p. 13).

Dropout rate is the "proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who are no longer enrolled in the following school year. … [It] measures the phenomenon of pupils from a cohort leaving school without completion, and its effect on the internal efficiency of educational systems. In addition, it is one of the key indicators for analysing and projecting pupil flows from grade to grade within an educational level" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 44). The dropout rate is "calculated by subtracting the sum of promotion rate and repetition rate from 100 in the given school year" (UNESCO 2009, p. 44).

Primary completion rate is the percentage of "graduates in a given year compared to the total number of children of official graduation age. …… Improving net enrolment rates together with completion rates, with improving balance by gender and urban/rural areas, can give a reasonably good indicator of an improving school system" (Boissiere, 2004).

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of nine chapters. **Chapter 1**, the introductory chapter, outlines the research background; conceptual foundation; research rationale and research objective, research significance; and definition of key terms.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research context and the researcher's schooling history. The chapter commences with the educational context of Southeast Asian countries, and the national and local contexts. This chapter ends with the researcher's schooling history summarising how he progressed through his educational journey.

Chapter 3 reviews related literature. It includes educational leadership, roles of education in society, literacy, Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and educational disadvantage in developing countries.

Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology. It first discusses the theoretical perspective, and then the research design. Next, it discusses the research method, selection of the study cases, and research procedure. After that, the data analysis procedure, trustworthiness, and finally ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of data from the three villages. The data from each village is presented separately but under the same three headings. These are the analysis of the interviews with the village headmen, and the focus group discussions with the parents who had children enrolled in school and those whose children dropped out of primary school. The chapter ends with a summary.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of data from the three primary schools. The data from each school is presented separately but under the same four headings. These include school leadership and management, teachers' views on parents and students, challenges to school internal efficiency, and enhancement of school internal efficiency. The chapter ends with a summary.

Chapter 7 presents the analysis of the data from the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB). The chapter consists of eight headings which include the key DESB staff's perceptions of educational opportunities and challenges, leadership in the DESB, social relation challenges, resourcing constraints, constraints to internal efficiency, improvement of internal efficiency and teaching and learning quality, and a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 8 discusses major findings presented in chapter 5, 6, and 7. This chapter consists of seven headings including an examination of key DESB staff members' knowledge and skills; poverty and its impact upon educational improvement in the district; the teaching and learning process; relationships between parents, VEDCs, teachers, and the DESB staff; opportunities to enter tertiary education and employment field; transformative potential of the Bourdieusian key concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field; and a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 9, the last chapter, summarises the main findings that respond to the research questions. This chapter also presents implications for theory and practice, provides recommendations for future research, and ends with limitations and delimitations.

Chapter 2
CONTEXT AND THE RESEARCHER

This chapter has two main sections. The first describes the educational context of Southeast Asian Nations, the national and local contexts. The national framework includes the geographic and demographic environments; the social, economic, historic, political and educational contexts. The local context includes both provincial and district settings. The second section relates to the researcher's background and schooling history perspective in a rural Lao context.

2.1 Educational context of ASEAN

Ten countries constitute the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), namely: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. As of November 2017 (Worldometers 2017), the ten nations have a combined total population of around 651 million but differ in terms of population size, geographic location, culture, and levels of socioeconomic development. Regardless of the differences, they have a similar aim to develop human resources to foster their country's development in order to enter global environments. Education, as a fundamental human right, is considered essential in developing their human resources. Therefore, each of the ten countries is committed to providing every child and citizen with opportunities to access their basic learning needs. Promoting quality and equitable education is a common policy for the countries in the Southeast Asian region regardless of their varying levels of development (ASEAN n.d.).

In the ASEAN, the overall progress in educational access, especially primary education enrolment has been constant since 1990, especially since MDG[7] adoption in 2000, with an average net enrolment rate in primary education of 96.8 percent in 2014 (ASEAN 2015). The lowest net enrolment rate in primary education was in Lao PDR and Myanmar (95 percent) followed by Cambodia (95.6 percent), whereas only Singapore achieved 100 percent of a primary net enrolment rate (ASEAN 2015). Lao PDR, however, provided an example of outstanding improvement in net enrolment rate (97.8 percent) of primary education in Asia over 15-year period (UNESCO 2015b).

[7] The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals with measurable targets and clear deadlines for improving the lives of the world's poorest people. To meet these goals and eradicate poverty, leaders of 189 countries signed the historic millennium declaration at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000. At that time, eight goals that range from providing universal primary education to avoiding child and maternal mortality were set with a target achievement date of 2015.

Most ASEAN countries are still confronted with a low quality of education at all levels, and improvement has been slow in the last ten years (World Economic Forum 2015). The overall educational access and quality in the poor countries – Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar – remain disadvantaged and rate behind others (UNDP & ASEAN 2015; World Economic Forum 2015). Table 2.1 below presents the ranking of the ASEAN countries based on their education quality as assessed by the World Economic Forum 2015. The numbers in the parentheses represent world rankings out of 140 countries worldwide. Brunei Darussalam did not participate in the 2015 report.

Table 2.1: Ranking of countries in Southeast Asia with educational context, 2015

ASEAN country ranking	Quality of primary education (World ranking)	Quality of education system (World ranking)	Quality of math & science education (World ranking)
1	Singapore (3)	Singapore (3)	Singapore (1)
2	Malaysia (15)	Malaysia (6)	Malaysia (12)
3	Indonesia (57)	Philippines (31)	Indonesia (52)
4	Philippines (67)	Indonesia (41)	Vietnam (65)
5	Vietnam (83)	Lao PDR (62)	Philippines (67)
6	Thailand (89)	Thailand (74)	Thailand (79)
7	Lao PDR (95)	Vietnam (78)	Lao PDR (90)
8	Cambodia (114)	Cambodia (100)	Cambodia (112)
9	Myanmar (133)	Myanmar (128)	Myanmar (127)

Source: World Economic Forum: The global competitiveness report 2015–2016

Primary school retention and completion rates still require much work to be done. Only three countries – Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore – achieved high retention rates to Grade 5 of nearly 100 percent, while the retention rate in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Philippines was less than 80 percent (World Bank 2016). In Lao PDR, the primary school retention rate to Grade 5 was 78 percent, as of 2013. Therefore, much work is required to enroll and retain children until completion of their primary education.

In regard to educational inequality, as claimed by UNESCAP, ADB, and UNDP (2013)[8], the disparity of boys and girls in education has been significantly minimised in most ASEAN countries. Today, Southeast Asia nations have achieved gender parity. The youth literacy rate is 98 percent and adult literacy rate is 92.3 percent. Lao PDR has the lowest literacy rate of 79 percent, followed by Cambodia with 80.7 percent.

2.2 National context

2.2.1 Geographic and demographic context

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) or better known as Laos, is a landlocked, poorly developed country characterised with low levels of per capita income, limited human resource development, and a lack of economic diversification. While Laos is recognised as a landlocked country, the Lao Government prefers to use the term 'land-linked', because Lao PDR is located in the heart of the Indochinese peninsular, wedged between China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar to the northwest. A 2011 survey showed 9.5 million hectares or 40.29 percent of a total land area of Lao PDR is very mountainous and densely forested (Forest Trends 2014). As the Southeast Asian region develops, Laos is becoming a crossroad and the gateway from China to Southeast Asia and a transit route between Thailand and Vietnam.

Lao PDR is divided into 18 provinces with 148 districts which are further divided into 8,507 villages (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015). The country has a population of approximately 6,492,400 as of 2015, spread over an area of 236,800 square kilometres, and yielding one of the lowest population densities (27 people per square kilometre) in Asia, with 62.5 percent living in rural areas (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015). Lao PDR is culturally and linguistically diverse, with 49 officially recognised

[8] UNESCAP = United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; ADB = Asian Development Bank; UNDP = United Nations Development Programme

ethnic groups and more than 200 subgroups. These subgroups make up the three main sections of the Lao population: Lao Loum (lowlanders), Lao Theung (uplanders), and Lao Soung (highlanders). Lao Loum is the biggest Lao ethnic group and comprises 68 percent of the population. Lao Theung is the second largest group at 22 percent, and Lao Soung accounts for 9 percent of the population. Each group has its own mother tongue, religion, culture, and beliefs. The official language is Lao which has successfully become the lingua franca of all Lao and non-Lao ethnic groups. Lao Loum is the predominant socio-cultural, economic and political group, mostly living in the lowlands and major urban areas while the Lao Theung are the most marginalised group socially, economically, and politically, of the three. The Lao population is predominantly Buddhist, though among the Lao Theung and Lao Soung, other religions are practised such as animism.

Lao PDR is mostly rural. Villages are scattered over low lands along roads, rivers and in valleys. In some areas villages are located about one or two kilometres apart while in some areas villages are five kilometres or further from one another. The current government supports the policy of combining small villages with larger ones or other small villages. This is to save the cost of infrastructure construction such as roads, electricity networks, healthcare centres, and schools, so the population can access these government services more easily. Individual rural villages consist of particular ethnic groups. That is, the same group form a village rather than joining a village of a different group. Most villages have grown in population over time. If good land becomes scarce in the vicinity, some households, especially low landers, search for new fertile lands and migrate to form new villages. Over the last twenty years, many households have moved from off-road communities to settle along roads and form new villages, where transportation is more convenient, and there is greater contact with the wider world. However, government services such as healthcare and schools cannot be provided immediately for the new settlers, so their children miss an opportunity to access education.

2.2.2 Social context

Although Lao PDR has enjoyed political stability, peace and an orderly society, it is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world and in the region. In the 2010 Human Development Index, it was ranked 122nd of 169 countries (United Nations Development Programme 2010). The poverty is due mainly to a lack of arable land and livestock ownership, poor infrastructure, and poor healthcare and educational services (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Health, & UNICEF, 2006). According to these organisations, vitamin and protein deficiencies among children

under-five and childbearing-aged women are still high, particularly in rural areas and among ethnic groups. Those who deliver healthcare and education to the minority groups are often faced with cultural and linguistic barriers.

Health conditions of Lao people vary. The Ministry of Planning and Investment et al. (2006) reported that chronic moderate vitamin and protein deficiencies are common, particularly among uplanders. In addition, poor sanitation and the prevalence of tropical diseases further erode the health of the rural population. Major infectious tropical diseases include dengue fever, malaria, diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever. Medical care is available in the central district, but the quality and experience of medical practitioners are limited. The life expectancy of the total population is 63.88 years, 61.88 years for males and 65.95 years for females (Central Intelligence Agency 2015). The gender gap in rural and remote areas is noticeable; where poverty is high, women are less literate and girls have less school access and completion rates than boys (UNICEF 2011). The literacy rate of the total population aged 15 and over is 79.9 percent, 87.1 percent for males and 72.8 percent for females (Central Intelligence Agency 2015).

Despite significant social and economic growth, the quality of life has not improved equally amongst all Lao inhabitants with 23 percent still living below the national poverty line in 2013 (International Monetary Fund 2015). Most people who live in the poor and disadvantaged communities, not only in remote and isolated areas but also those in easily reachable regions, continue to work as subsistence farmers. Due to poor road access and infrastructure, the communities are not often assisted and supported in their development. Most of the wealth is in the urban areas, where only 37.6 percent of the total population live (World Bank 2015). While some in urban areas enjoy meals and fancy restaurants and satellite television, people in the countryside and on the mountains can go hungry when their farming fails to yield crops.

Due to malnutrition, Lao children are often challenged by stunted growth. In 2011–2012, 44 percent of children aged under 5 were shown to have some level of stunted growth. The main causes are related to high rates of adolescent pregnancy and maternal undernutrition; inadequate infant and young child feeding practices; poor nutrition among children and pregnant or postpartum women; food insecurity and inadequate water supply; sanitation and hygiene services (UNICEF 2013). In addition, infrastructure is undeveloped, especially in rural areas. Lao PDR has a basic road system, but internal telecommunications do not cover every corner of the country, especially in very remote areas (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015). Although electricity is available to most of the

population, internet connection is only accessible in the major cities. In some district centres, it can also be wirelessly connected but for a very limited radius at a slow speed. Neither landline nor wireless internet connection is officially available in education offices in district centres nor public primary and secondary schools in rural areas across the country.

2.2.3 Economic context

Lao PDR has undergone significant social and economic development since 1986 when the Government paid closer attention to reforming the economic structure by shifting from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. As a result, for the five year period from 2011 to 2015, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate averaged 8.1 percent annually (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015). In 2014, Lao PDR reached a Gross National Income[9] per capita of US$1,660, and has moved up from its lower income status to a lower-middle income economy (World Bank 2014). At this stage, Lao PDR is on track to achieve its long-term goal to escape from a Least Developed Country status by 2020. Hydropower and mining sectors are the major sources of the economic growth and have steadily contributed to a dramatic reduction in poverty rates, but hidden in the poverty reduction strategies are disparities across the country and within ethnic groups (UNICEF 2011).

Although Laos' economy is progressing, it is still weak compared with that of other ASEAN member states. The Ministry of Planning and Investment (2015) reports the economy depends largely on natural resources, semi-processed activities and agriculture, and production for export is still in a nascent state, with the majority of it taking place in independent, private and small transactions. The financing of socio-economic development has been continuously and heavily dependent on loans, grants and private investment. Although GDP per capita stood at US$5,400 in 2015 (Central Intelligence Agency 2015), it is still low compared with other countries in the region, and a high proportion of the population (23 percent in 2015) continues to fall below the national poverty line (International Monetary Fund 2015). As Laos' economy relies on foreign assistance and natural resources, it is easily affected by global and regional political turmoil, economic or financial crises and degradation of natural resources.

[9] Gross National Income (GNI): The value of all final goods and services produced in a country in one year (gross domestic product) plus income that residents have received from abroad, minus income claimed by non-residents.

2.2.4 Historical and political context

For two centuries (from 1779 to 1975), Laos was under colonial rule of foreign countries (Siam, now Thailand, 1779–1893 and France, 1893–1954) and fell into the Civil War and Indochina War (1955–1975). After the Japanese withdrawal at the end of World War II, Laos was gradually drawn into the vortex of the Cold War, and a struggle developed between the communist side, called Pathet Lao, and the Royal Lao government supported by the USA. In 1975, the Pathet Lao won political control and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was established as was the development of Lao education.

The government of Lao PDR is a single-party autocracy. The Party is headed by the Party's Central Committee, which is selected through the Party Congress. The Party Congress, held every five years, determines national priorities and approves guidelines for the Government. Political dissent is generally not accepted and the culture of national governance continues to be strongly hierarchical: "information flows up in the hierarchy, while decisions flow down" (Stuart-Fox, 2008, p. 3). Since 2010, "the country has enjoyed political stability, peace, [and] social order[;] all of which have underpinned development and facilitated business-growth, production-services and investment" (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2015, p. 3).

2.2.5 Educational context

The Government of Lao PDR places education development as the important key to national socio-economic growth which will enable the country to exit from the status belonging to least developed countries and move forwards. Education progress today has undoubtedly been influenced by education in the past. It is therefore necessary to contextualise the current education by briefly outlining the history of education reform before independence dating back to 1800s during Siamese colonialism. Since then, the education system of Lao PDR has undergone four periods of transition.

- **Education during Siamese colonialism 1800s**

Prior to French colonisation in 1893, there were traditional temple schools available for Buddhist Lao men, but not for non-Buddhist ethnic minorities. Among the latter, traditional education was transmitted from mothers to daughters and from fathers to sons, until modern government schools were built in the villages. The advent of government school also had an effect on the Lao traditional temple school system. There were three forms of Buddhist temple education. The first form was informal. Boys or men lived in a temple and took part in activities at the temple, such as in ceremonies, caring for the temple yards and buildings, and so on. They learnt how to read and write Lao language along with monks and novices in informal classes taught by more senior monks or teachers. The second form was known as Sangha School 'Song School'. This form of schooling had

a national curriculum and consisted of formal classes taught by monk teachers, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The third form of education was confined to the teaching of the classical and liturgical Pali language to produce competent monks, knowledgeable about the Buddhist teaching. Only monks and novices could attend this form of schooling.

- **Education during French colonialism (1893–1954)**

After Laos fell into the French protectorate in 1893, the educational situation began to change. To fulfil the important task of developing a French Indochinese identity across the Southeast Asian region, the French government selected Lao youths from privileged families to study in France in order to build support for the French colonial system in Laos (Kanstrup-Jensen, 2007). In 1902, the first schools were established in two provinces – Vientiane and Luangprabang – only for the Lao elite families, and French was the instructional language (Phonekeo, 1996).

In colonial French Indochina, there were two educational systems: the French and Indochinese systems (Chounlamany & Kounphilaphanh, 2011). The French educational system was the same as in France, from preschool up to upper secondary school. However, in Laos, these schools were only available in the cities and mainly for the children of French families working there. Some Lao children whose parents had close relationships with French officials could gain an opportunity to access these schools. The Indochinese system was at a primary level, adapted to suit local Lao culture, tradition and language. Although the primary education curriculum differed from the French schools, Lao pupils started to learn French on the first day of grade one (Phonekeo, 1996). From lower secondary education level upwards, all Lao students were orientated toward the French education system, and textbooks and curriculum were the same as the ones used in France (Phonekeo, 1996). According to Phonekeo (1996) in 1938, there were 84 primary schools across the country. Among these, only six schools offered a full course of primary education of Grades 1–6, and there was only one secondary school. Fourteen years later in 1952, the first teacher training institute was established in Vientiane offering a four-year program, with 30 primary school graduates attending the program in the first year, and 90 students were enrolled in the following year (Phonekeo, 1996).

The French government did not want to provide schooling for ethnic minority groups in Laos because the French considered people such as Lao Theung as slaves and therefore, it was not necessary to educate them (Kanstrup-Jensen, 2007). During 60 years of French colonialism, only seven Lao people graduated from university, only 31 people completed upper secondary school, and 118 people finished lower secondary school (Phonekeo, 1996). Lao women did not access education during this period as the French education system was considered unsuitable for Lao women and girls.

The level of education provided by temple schooling was not sufficient for administrative jobs during the colonial period. This caused a decrease in numbers of students attending traditional temple-based schools. In 1935 the temple schools modernised their curriculum to try to compete with French elementary schools, however, the trend of losing students to the French schools continued because of the demand for positions within the government, which required skills in reading, writing, and speaking French that a temple school could not offer. The French had no intention to intervene as they relied on the influx of students for a continuation of "moral" education and used it as a tool to preserve traditional religion and culture.

- **Education during civil war (1955–1975)**

After Laos gained independence from France in 1954, an internal political conflict divided the country into two zones. The first was known as the Royal Lao Government zone based in cities, supported by the USA during the Vietnam War. The second zone was governed by the Lao Patriotic Front, supported by North Vietnam, located in the liberated zone in the eastern part of Laos along the borders with Vietnam and China (Chaleunsin, 1996). According to Phonekeo (1996), the Royal Lao Government and Lao Patriotic Front agreed on education system reform to establish a structure that provided equal opportunity for all, regardless of status, to access education and one that provided education suitable for the local conditions and relevant to daily life. Promoting nationalism was also the focus of the education system. However, the agreement was not carried out in practice. While the Royal Lao Government continued to focus on urban inhabitants, the Lao Patriotic Front tried to provide schooling that was accessible for all ethnic groups, using only Lao as the instructional language throughout the educational system. The Royal Lao Government utilised Lao in primary school but French in higher levels as the instructional language. This distinction created tensions and eventually resulted in Laos having two parallel educational systems; one administered by the Royal Lao Government and the other run by the Lao Patriotic Front (Phonekeo, 1996). By 1975, the Lao Patriotic Front had established 268 complete primary schools, 46 lower secondary schools, 3 upper secondary schools, 19 teacher training schools (4+2)[10] for primary school level, one teacher

[10] (4+2) refers to qualification based on completion of four-year primary education plus two years of pre-service teacher training.

training school for lower secondary school teachers (7+3)[11] and one teacher training college (10+3)[12] (Chaleunsin, 1996).

- **Education after independence (1975–present)**

The Lao government prioritised and structured education based on the Lao People's Revolutionary Party policies aiming to empower working class people (Bounsengthong, 1996). General education was amended from a 10-year to an 11-year system (5+3+3)[13]. The need to improve general education led the government to put effort into constructing and staffing schools across the country. However, owing to limited resources, most schools were poorly constructed, often of bamboo and thatch, and staffed by only one or two teachers. Many local people who were recruited as teachers in rural areas had attended temple schools and had not attended teacher training college. According to Chounlamany and Kounphilaphanh (2011), teachers' salaries were low and paid months late; and many schools offered only Grade 1 or 2 of primary education with a lack of textbooks and other curricular materials. Because of the low and unreliable payment of salaries, teachers were forced to spend significant amounts of time farming or other on work activities to earn a living, with the result that classes were actually held for only a few hours a day in some locations.

In 1986, the Lao education system was reformed, with the aim of making education more relevant to local socio-economic conditions. Sisavanh (2003) reported that the necessity of education reform was closely linked to the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism, aimed at improving society at large in moving to a market economy and developing international economic cooperation. Consequently, international organisations – Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and UNICEF – launched many projects that were related to educational improvement, and many international consultants came to work with curriculum and textbook development and teacher training courses (Sisavanh, 2003). In 1994, the student-centered teaching approach was introduced to classrooms in Laos (Chounlamany & Kounphilaphanh, 2011), after the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand. Between 1986 and 2009, the curriculum was redesigned to correspond to the market economic orientation. The 11-year education system continued until the school year 2010–2011 when the 12-year system (5+4+3) was adopted. The main objective of the education reform

[11] (7+3) refers to qualification based on completion of lower secondary school (7 years of general education) plus three years of pre-service teacher training.

[12] (10+3) refers to qualification based on completion of upper secondary school (10 years of general education) plus three years of pre-service teacher training.

[13] (5+3+3) refers to a structure of general education comprising primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school.

under the New Economic Mechanism was to achieve the goals of Education for All. Hence, the Lao government placed great emphasis on extending educational opportunities to include the marginalised population to ensure equal access to quality education for all without discrimination of ethnicity, gender, or age.

To date, the Lao government has paid attention to and prioritised education development as a key for human resource development. The government has allocated annual budgets of 11–15 percent of the government's expenditures for the education sector, to improve administration, infrastructure, and the teaching-learning quality, from pre-school to higher education level (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c). For primary education development, the government has allotted budgets for constructing school buildings to expand the network of primary schools to all children aged 6–10 years throughout the country. As a result, primary education has been gradually improving, yet despite the fast development of primary education in terms of quantity, internal efficiency still needs to be improved. Repetition and dropout rates, especially in Grades 1 and 2, are still high. Ability in reading, writing and calculating with the four basic math functions is still low, and the proportion of multigrade classes and incomplete primary schools also remains high (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c).

2.2.6 Education system

The Lao formal education system comprises general education, vocational and technical education, and higher education. General education covers pre-school (childcare for children up to 2 years and kindergarten for children aged 3–5), primary education for children aged 6-10, lower secondary education for children aged 11–14 and upper secondary education for children aged 15–17). The structure of the current education system is 5+4+3, and represents five years of primary schooling, four years in lower secondary school, and three years in upper secondary school. Primary and lower secondary education constitute basic education, providing nine years of schooling. Primary education is compulsory and free for all children, regardless of culture and socio-economic background (National Assembly 2015). Lao education applies a semester system, with 33 weeks of schooling per academic year, five days in a week, and 6 hours a day (UNESCO 2011).

Vocational institutes accept students who completed lower secondary school and upper secondary school and offer courses of study up to three years. These institutes offer teacher training for pre-school up to lower secondary school teachers. To become pre-school teachers, lower secondary school graduates are required to take a one-year teacher training program. To work as primary school teachers, there are two main pathways: completion of lower secondary school plus a three-

year teacher training program or completion of upper-secondary school plus a one-year teacher training program. Lower secondary school teachers have completed upper secondary school and a three-year teacher training course of study, and upper-secondary school teachers have completed a four-year course of study at university.

Education administration has three levels: The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS), and a District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB). The entire system is administered by the MoES. Management of responsibilities is distributed to the PESS, DESB, and school leaders. The PESS has academic responsibilities for secondary schools, while the DESB has direct responsibilities for primary education. The PESS and DESB provide teaching support to secondary schools and primary schools respectively. At the village level, communities participate in the school's development through the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). The following sections discuss responsibilities of the MoES, PESS, DESB, and VEDC.

- **Responsibilities of the MoES**

According to the Prime Ministerial Decree No. 282/PM, dated 7 September 2011, the MoES has responsibility for:

a. developing strategic and action plans, policy frameworks, and development projects for national education and sports;
b. issuing and improving legislation related to administration and management of education and sports;
c. disseminating strategic plans, policies, development projects of educational and sports, approved by the government, and supervising and guiding the implementation;
d. researching and improving institutional organisation and management across the country to suit the periodic socio-economic development plans;
e. recruiting, allocating, and training personnel in the education and sports sectors;
f. developing a national standard of education and sports in order to improve quality to meet the ASEAN and international standards;
g. coordinating with inter-ministries and local authorities about the education and sports development in the country;
h. managing budgets, finance and properties belonging to the education and sports sectors;

i. inspecting, monitoring, and evaluating the implementation of the national development plans periodically; and

j. liaising and working cooperatively with the ASEAN and foreign countries and international organisations in terms of the education and sports development.

- **Responsibilities of the PESS**

According to the Ministerial Decree No. 2350/MoES.PD, dated 10 July 2012, the PESS has the following main responsibilities:

a. developing development plans for private and public secondary schools, technical and vocational schools, colleges, and non-formal education within the province;

b. issuing and improving legislation for management and administration of education and sports within the province;

c. improving institutional organisations and educational and sports management to suit periodical socio-economic development plans;

d. disseminating plans and projects for education and sports development and guiding implementation;

e. managing upper secondary schools, vocational and technical institutes and colleges within a province based on the national standard, especially having model schools achieve the goals;

f. managing budgets, finance, and properties belonging to education and sports sectors;

g. incorporating statistics and information of education and sports within a province and reporting to the MoES by the due date;

h. supervising and guiding personnel of DESBs, Sangha schools[14], education and sports centers, and sports fields within the province; and

i. inspecting, monitoring, and evaluating the implementation of education and sports development plans periodically.

[14] Sangha school is a temple school organised in a Buddhist temple in district centers and cities for novices taught by monks and teachers. The curriculum is similar to that of the formal education.

- **Responsibilities of the DESB**

According to the Ministerial Decree No. 825/MoES.PD, dated 16 March 2012, the DESB has the following responsibilities:

a. developing development plans for private and public pre-school, primary schools and non-formal education within the district;
b. issuing and improving legislation for educational and sports management within the district;
c. improving institutional organisation and management of education and sports in accordance with periodic socio-economic development plans;
d. disseminating development plans and projects of education and sports and guiding schools for implementation;
e. managing pre-schools, primary schools, and sporting activities within the district, aligning with the national standard, especially having model schools achieve the goals;
f. managing educational personnel within the district;
g. supervising personnel of education and sports centres to implement respective plans;
h. managing budgets, finance, and properties belonging to the educational and sports sectors;
i. incorporating statistics and information about education within the district and reporting to the PESS by the due date; and
j. inspecting, monitoring, and evaluating implementation of education and sports development plans periodically.

- **Responsibilities of the VEDC**

According to the Education Law of Lao PDR (National Assembly 2015), Article 87, the VEDC has several responsibilities in working cooperatively with schools, such as planning, budgeting, investing, building infrastructure, and maintaining school environments and properties. In addition, in villages the VEDC is responsible for encouraging and facilitating parental involvement, monitoring students' school attendance, identifying problems, and finding solutions for them.

2.2.7 Education law

Article 4 of the Education Law of Lao PDR states that the government of Lao PDR considers education as the central priority for human resource development and encourages all Lao citizens regardless of gender, age, and ethnicity to access education (National Assembly 2015). Article 6 of the

Education Law asserts that all Lao people, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, and physical and socio-economic status, have equal rights to receive quality education and life-long learning. Article 38 of the Constitution of Lao PDR (2003) reiterates that all Lao citizens have the right to receive education and improve themselves.

Article 4 of the Education Law of Lao PDR also states that the government intends to expand pre-school education, promote sanitation, provide fundamental nutrition at school, and make compulsory primary education free for all. The government will increase investment in education development and expand education to include the marginalised population. In addition, the government will provide incentives for teachers, educational personnel and learners as appropriate. The government will encourage individuals, national or international organisations to invest in national education development, especially vocational schools and professional training to achieve quality through high standards. Article 22 of the Lao Constitution stipulates that the State will ensure the implementation of the education development policy and the compulsory primary education scheme, with a view to training Lao people to be good citizens. The State and society will endeavour to improve the quality of the national education system, to create opportunities and favourable conditions for all people to receive education, particularly the inhabitants of remote and isolated areas, ethnic minorities, women, children and disadvantaged citizens. The State will promote and encourage investment by the private sector in the development of the national education system in accordance with the law.

Article 1 of the Education Law of Lao PDR outlines the aim of education to prepare the next generation with a scientific world outlook, a spirit of patriotism, and a sense of solidarity with all Lao multi-ethnic people and with people all over the world. Young people should be trained as good citizens who recognise their rights, interests and duties; are able to preserve and promote the finest national arts, culture, tradition, and customs; have a consciousness of self-reliance and self-sufficiency; possess general, scientific and technological knowledge, and vocational skills; are well-disciplined and accountable; have good health, think creatively, follow a healthy lifestyle; and are ready to take part in the national development cause.

2.2.8 Educational policy and overall goal up to 2020

The Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2016–2020 carries on the unfinished agenda implemented in the previous five years (2011–2015) in order to regularly tackle existing challenges. The MoES has determined an overall goal for the education and sports development plan for up to 2020:

> *The Education and Sports Sector in Lao PDR is appropriately structured and resourced to create opportunity for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports and to benefit from socio-economic development in order for the Lao PDR to be eligible to graduate from least developed country status by 2020* (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c, p. 8, original emphasis).

Education improvement and human resources development in all areas will lead to improvement in living standards for all of the Lao population and to socioeconomic development which will boost national economic growth. To achieve this goal, the education system structure needs to be suitably improved, and human resources need to be appropriately and sufficiently allocated. A suitable education system structure refers to one that allows all school-age children to access primary education and continue until completion and ensures all children enroll in and complete secondary schooling (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c). In addition, quality and relevance of school curriculum need to be ensured, and the provision of teaching-learning materials is fundamental in providing students with essential knowledge and skills to merge with ASEAN economies. Graduation from the underdeveloped status is closely associated with escaping from poverty. The education sector will contribute to increasing the human development index by enhancing the literacy rate of the school-age population and increasing the enrolment rate in secondary schooling (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c).

To deal with the challenges related to primary education and continue development until 2020, the Ministry of Education and Sports (2015c) has set out an overall goal and a number of targets and strategies.

Overall goal: The goal is to ensure all primary school-age children are enrolled and acquire a functional level of literacy and numeracy; and make significant improvements in school-based management. This goal is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which is to "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning opportunities for all*" (UNESCO 2015a, p. iii, original emphasis).

Targets for 2020: The MoES has planned strategies for primary education to be achieved by 2020. The Ministry of Education and Sports (2015b) set targets for increasing the net enrolment rate from 98.5 percent in 2015 to 99 percent, the retention rate from 78.3 percent in 2015 to 90 percent, and the primary student completion rate from 76 percent in 2015 to 89 percent. The targets also involve decreasing the repetition and dropout rates to 1 percent or less. Especially in Grade 1, the repetition and dropout rates are highest and expected to drop from 13.5 percent and 8.5 percent respectively to less than 5 percent for both. In addition, the gender parity index is expected to stay between

0.97 and 1.03, and sanitation facilities at primary schools are to rise by 20 percent to 85 percent in 2020.

Strategies: The five strategies that are being implemented to achieve the goal and targets above comprise:

1. All children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic background, are to be enrolled and to complete a quality primary education. The aim is providing opportunities for all school-age children to access primary education and to increase its internal efficiency (retention rate and learning performance). The detailed work includes constructing and repairing school buildings and improving school environments and providing facilities for better teaching-learning processes and for the disabled; providing teaching-learning materials; encouraging and supporting communities and parents to send their school-aged children to schools; and implementing a nationwide the 'progressive promotion' policy[15].

2. Improving teaching-learning quality. The aim is to equip primary graduates with basic knowledge of natural and social sciences, basic English language skills[16], and basic functional literacy and numeracy. To achieve this, the MoES outlines several activities which include training teachers for single and multigrade classes locally; encouraging learning groups in schools and between schools in the same area; developing and improving curriculum and teaching-learning methods; providing teaching-learning materials and visual aids and facilities for the disabled, special-needs, and disadvantaged students; organising extra classes for weak students; and evaluating and analysing primary school performance based on an education quality standard. In addition, primary schools are encouraged to provide a reading corner or a library for students. Teachers and parents are also trained to take care of and integrate children with disabilities in classrooms.

3. Improving primary school management and administration. This aspect strives to find ways of using resources more effectively and efficiently. The focus is on improving school management and administration, particularly school-based management, through strengthening the skills and knowledge of school principals; creating opportunities for pedagogical advisors to visit

[15] Progressive promotion means that students are allowed to move up to the next grade after each school year. Weak students identified in each grade must take extra-classes and pass the assessment. This is to reduce a repetition and dropout rate.

[16] English language has been included in the Grade 3 curriculum since 2010.

schools and assist teachers at least once per semester; encouraging schools and Village Education Development Committees (VEDCs) with participative school development plans and a sense of school ownership; using school administrative budgets effectively; developing and improving legislation related to primary education; and monitoring and evaluating primary school management and administration.

4. Encouraging communities to participate in school improvement. The aim is to involve VEDCs and parents or guardians in accepting responsibility for their school's improvement planning. The focus is on strengthening status of VEDCs in primary education development, promoting education benefits for communities, and improving the processes of monitoring, supporting and assisting the VEDCs.

5. Promoting health, sanitation and nutrition at school. The aim is to improve children's nutrition and health to lead to good physical and mental development. The focus is on children living in poverty and those living in remote areas. The focused activities include promotion of healthy food and nutrition, provision of food at schools, and encouragement of government projects which include school gardens and learning to raise livestock. Teachers and administrators are charged with promoting sanitation, nutrition education and healthy life styles, and the creation of clean and safe school environments. Communities are also involved in promoting sanitation, healthy life styles and nutrition education at schools.

2.2.9 Education development vision up to 2030

The Government's vision for socio-cultural development up to 2030 is that 'human resources are developed to be equivalent to the region and the world and that a strong workforce will be the response to the need for national socio-economic development; all Lao citizens will hold the qualification of an upper secondary school certificate; quality healthcare services will be available for all Lao people with the average life expectancy of over 75 years' (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c). In line with this vision to 2030, the Lao government has set up general directions for socio-economic development up to 2025. Within these objectives, the government sees socio-cultural development as the highest priority amongst development strategies by focusing on enhancing people's living conditions, reducing poverty, and developing education, culture, and manual work skills in both quantity and quality. Based on the vision and strategies set by the government, the MoES states its mission: 'Up to 2030, all Lao citizens will receive quality education to develop themselves to become good, healthy, knowledgeable and professional citizens who will contribute to sustainable country development' (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c). The immediate future

of educational development focuses mainly on access and quality improvement for developing national human resources to meet the need of the country's socio-economic development plan. In particular, education is considered a major intervention to alleviate poverty. Therefore, the educational vision up to 2020 includes the following foci:

1. Achieving compulsory primary education and extending compulsory education to lower secondary education and ensuring all can access education and be ready to contribute to socio-economic development.

2. Eradicating illiteracy among all ethnic populations through life-long learning.

3. Promoting basic vocational skills at secondary schools, improving the system of polytechnic schools and higher education institutions emphasising quality improvement and ensuring students are equipped with skills required by the labour market.

4. Training technicians, professionals, and intellectuals to have the capacity to apply modern science, technology and information to serve the needs of socio-economic development.

5. Improving quality and relevance of education to promote socio-economic development, including skills and basic knowledge that allow students to accumulate their own family incomes, especially in remote and isolated areas.

6. Using information and communications technologies (ICT) as tools for management and administration of education and sports, teaching-learning and quality improvement.

7. Extending research, evaluation and strategies nationwide from central to local levels and applying research findings and evaluation results to the development of plans for education and sports development.

8. Extending gymnastics, artistic and athletics education to local levels; training teachers in skills of gymnastics, the arts, and athletics; training referees, coaches, and athletes; and providing sports equipment to local schools. (Ministry of Education and Sports 2015c)

2.3 Local context

The local context in this study refers to the context in rural Laos. In this study, it refers to the provincial context includes the environments of districts and villages within the province. Savannakhet Province is located in the central part of Lao PDR. It shares a border with Thailand in

the west and Vietnam in the east, so it becomes both a crossroad and a link so with its geographical advantage, this province receives valuable opportunities to enter international markets and attract international investment (Nolintha, 2011). Savannakhet is the largest (an area of 21,774 square kilometres, about 90 percent flat land) and most populated province in Lao PDR. It is made up of 15 districts, 1,006 villages, and 974,700 inhabitants with a density of 45 people per square kilometre (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015). Inhabiting the land in Savannakhet Province are two main ethnic groups: Lao Loum and Lao Theung. Lao Loum people live on flat land on the western part of the province while the Lao Theung group resides in the eastern part on the slopes of the mountains.

This province is one of the most socio-economically developed provinces in Lao PDR. Its economy grew at an average of 12 percent annually during 2011–2015, which is greater than the national average (Nolintha, 2011). With the advantage of large flat areas, agriculture remains the largest sector of the economy, about 50 percent of the provincial GDP per capita in 2010, and the province's average income continue to grow significantly (Nolintha, 2011). While Savannakhet is the largest province, its considerable agricultural land has low fertility (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011) and farmers need much fertiliser to improve agricultural productivity. In the dry season, most rivers dry up and limit agricultural activities in the region, but in the rainy season there is extensive flooding devastating the rice paddies, crops, and livestock of the local people.

The province's education system has improved gradually during the last decade. The whole province has a total of 1,226 primary schools, 131 lower secondary schools, and 77 upper secondary schools (Provincial Education and Sports Service 2015b). In addition, there are seven vocational schools and a university established in 2009. However, most of the province's population has a relatively low level of educational attainment.

The province has higher literacy rates but a relatively lower school attendance rate, compared with Laos as a whole (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011). According to Provincial Education and Sports Service (2015a) and Ministry of Education and Sports (2015a), the net enrolment rate for primary education was 98.1 percent almost identical to the national rate of 98.5 percent. The retention rate was 70.1 percent, about 8 percent lower than the national rate of 78.3 percent. Also, the dropout rate of Grade 1–5 was 7.3 percent, about 2 percent higher than the national rate of 5.2 percent, and the dropout rate in Grade 1 was 9.3 percent also higher than the national rate of 8.5 percent.

Atsaphangthong District is located on the lowland with an area of 7.27 square kilometres, surrounded by five districts, and is approximately 70 kilometres from the provincial capital city. There is a main

road running through connecting Vietnam in the east with Thailand in the west of the province. The district has 40 villages, with 44,248 inhabitants (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015) with the majority engaging in subsistent agriculture: raising livestock and growing seasonal crops. The land in this district is dry and infertile so that farmers must use considerable amounts of fertiliser. In rainy reasons, there is often flooding which destroys the rice production. As a result, some years, many families do not have sufficient rice for consumption, so many young teenagers leave their village to work in Thailand because of limited local private employment, and relatively low wages.

According to statistics provided by the District Education and Sports Bureau (2015), there are 55 primary schools across the district, with three schools providing only Grades 1–3. There are 204 classrooms; amongst which 66 are multi-grade classrooms, 32.4 percent of all classrooms. There are 462 educational personnel, with 234 females, and 40 administrative staff working in the DESB. Among these, there are 106 probationary personnel, 212 primary school teachers including principals, and 5573 students including 2758 girls. The ratio of students per class is 28.1 and the student-teacher ratio is 26.5. Primary education statistics show that the net enrolment rate is 98.1 percent (provincial 98.1 percent), retention rate 82.6 percent (provincial 70.1 percent), dropout rate 5.9 percent (provincial 7.3 percent), completion rate 88.7 percent (provincial 76.0 percent), and the girls-to-boys ratio was 0.98 (provincial 0.89 percent) (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015).

2.4 The researcher's schooling history

I was born in a small rural village which consisted of around 70 houses and 300 inhabitants, located off-road about seven kilometres from the nearest town. All households are subsistence farmers, growing rice in the rainy season, growing vegetables and raising farm animals. In my family, there were eight members including me. My parents were illiterate, and my father was deaf. My two older sisters dropped out of the first year of lower secondary school and my younger brother and sister left primary school in Grade 4. They dropped out of school, because of family poverty, to help our parents with rice farming work and provide care for family members. Our family was amongst the poorest in the village. Some years we ran out of rice 3–4 months before the new rice harvest. During these months, my mother had to borrow some rice from her cousins and collect bamboo shoots to exchange for rice from other villagers. My family status worsened after my father became very unwell when I was in the first year of upper secondary school. Six months later, he passed away when I was in my second year of upper secondary school. However, I decided not to drop out of school.

What I learnt from home was about fishing, hunting, collecting forest produce, and farming. I did not hear my family members and neighbours talk about education or college or university. I only heard that mathematics was very difficult to learn, and teachers were strict and often punished lazy students in classes. At first, I felt scared to be part of the schooling venture but later I felt comfortable as I could perform academically well. Although my primary school teachers often punished those who did not do homework or could not do classwork, I was not aware of anyone being absent or dropping out because of this punishment. I felt that punishment at school was a normal practice.

When I was primary age, my village did not have electricity, televisions, and telephones. The villagers travelled on foot, and hand-written letters played a main role in their communications. I heard my mother and aunt say that going to school was to learn to read and write at least letters in Lao language. My parents did not have hopes or expectations for me to go onto tertiary education or to be employed, as in the village no one even completed upper secondary school. My parents neither encouraged me to stay in school nor did they tell me to drop out. It was my own determination and perseverance to struggle through an educational journey in the hope of escaping the cycle of poverty.

When I was in lower secondary school, I had a dream that I wanted to be a mathematics teacher in secondary school. This inspiration may have come from overhearing my teachers talking about their qualifications and life at their college. I wanted to have similar experiences, qualifications, and an occupation as my teachers. I also wanted to get away from my village to find a better life. Realistically, I was too lazy to want to work on the farm under the sun or in the rain and also only a small piece of an arable land was to be divided amongst my siblings who each would receive a tiny allocation making future life even more difficult. However, the journey from primary to upper secondary education with limited economic and cultural capital from home meant that I encountered a range of difficulties.

In my time there, the primary school in my village offered Grades 1–3 with two teachers. Grades 2 and 3 shared one classroom. After Grade 3, all students in my village went to Grade 4 and 5 in another primary school in a neighbouring village, located 2 kilometres away, and could continue to Grades 1 to 3 of lower secondary school in the same village. In the morning, we walked to attend the class, walked back home for lunch at noon, and then went back to school in the afternoon. We commuted through the forests on a narrow-ragged footpath, up and down the slopes, and across streams.

During our lower secondary schooling, we brought a lunch box with us and left it in a nun's small abandoned abode in the village temple. A generous monk kept his food for our lunch. In the end of lower secondary schooling, all the Grade 3 students in my school failed the final examination. Across my district in that school year, only one Grade 3 student passed the examination. This resulted in the dropout of most of my classmates including myself. I went to the regional city to work in a timber mill with a friend. After five days, my friend's uncle came to take him back to school, and we went back together to repeat the Grade 3 of lower secondary school.

My upper secondary school was located about seven kilometres from my home village. I commuted on foot alone to this school. In the first school year, every morning I awoke early and left home at around 5.00 a.m. My mother was up earlier to prepare a lunch box for me. In rainy seasons, commuting was very difficult because the path was slippery and muddy. When there was flooding, I had to take another longer route to avoid the flooded area. I kept my lunch box in the farmhouse (where my friends from other villages and I had lunch together), changed my uniform and walked to classes.

In the second year, we turned the farmhouse into our home and stayed there during school days until we completed upper secondary school. After my final examination, I returned home and to rice farming. I thought that my schooling life was over, and after rice harvesting, I would leave the village to find work in a city or Thailand. Some of my neighbours said that there was no government scholarship provision that year. A month later, I received a letter from the principal of my upper secondary school informing that I had won a government scholarship for an English language course at university in Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR.

Poverty and school locations could not undermine my determination and perseverance. I felt that my education costs were minimal as I only needed school uniforms, notebooks, pens, pencils, and rulers. Economic and cultural capital and habitus from home did not apply to me as a participant, because I felt that it was not difficult to play the game and progress in the schooling system. I outperformed my classmates and represented my schools to take academic tests at district, provincial, and national level. In upper secondary school, I was the second-best student in my province. In classes, I learnt by attentively listening to my teachers, taking notes, and memorising. At home I reviewed the previous lessons and did homework. If there was a point that I did not understand, I would persist with it and try again and again. I was interested in seeking ways to solve academic problems by myself rather than asking peers or teachers questions because I liked learning from my own mistakes.

I did not feel alienated participating at each level of my educational journey. The school in rural areas was not seen as an official or a strange place since every student was from the same village with the same habitus (mode of thinking, valuing, understanding, and behaving) that was particular to the local area. We all started to learn new things at the same time at school and moved to the next level together. The difference in individuals' learning performance was irrelevant to our possession of home habitus and capital that was preferred by the school system but was related to an individual's mindset. Indeed, I myself came from a poor and illiterate family in a rural area but I was able to achieve educational success.

2.5 Summary

This chapter discusses educational contexts in ASEAN countries, Lao PDR, and the province where this study was conducted. Every ASEAN country aims to develop human resources by improving education quality, but most countries still confront poor educational quality at all levels. Especially, educational access and quality in the poor countries remain low. The geographic and demographic, social, economic, and historical and political context of education in Lao PDR are discussed in relation to how the education system has developed from the colonial era until the present time. In addition, the vision and educational policy up to 2030 to achieve the SDG 4 are summarised. In relation to the local context, demography, geography, economy, and education in the province and the district was discussed. The researcher's brief schooling story demonstrates that Bourdieu's concepts – social, economic, and cultural capital – are not necessarily key determinants in an individual's schooling achievement. The next chapter reviews literature related to this study.

Chapter 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature related to educational leadership roles in school development, and then considers the importance of capital and habitus in schooling achievement. After that, it examines the role of education in society, including subsections such as fostering incomes and economies, reducing poverty, improving health, preventing diseases, reducing maternal and infant mortality; fertility, and building peace. It reflects on literacy in terms of social practice; defines the concepts of multiliteracy, functional literacy, critical literacy, and the literacy required for primary education in Lao PDR. It appraises the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 policy, with its overarching goal and targets for education. Finally, the chapter reviews the literature related to educational challenges in rural areas of developing countries, including those related to families and schools but also corruption in the education system.

3.1 Roles of leadership in school improvement

There is widespread acceptance that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes. In many parts of the world, including Lao PDR, there is recognition that schools require effective leaders if they are to provide the best possible education for their students. Leadership is a key variable for improvement in schools (Preedy, Bennett, & Wise, 2012), and it is second only to classroom teaching quality in influencing student learning performance (Leithwood & Day, 2008). Effective leadership includes the ability to manage the critical functions of a school, especially as these become more complex, and the resources under their care more substantial (Hutton, 2016). This requires the leadership of effective principals and the support of other senior and middle managers, such as District Education and Sports Bureau officers, as schools operate most successfully when under competent leadership and productive management.

A competent school principal can transform a school environment so that its students and teachers can flourish because his or her expertise determines all aspects from academic improvement to school environment, from parent and community support to student achievement (Wrigley, Thomson, & Lingard, 2012). The school principal creates appropriate conditions and a culture to improve both the school's and the individual's learning capacity which in turn, raises the quality of education provided (Duignan, 2012). Dinham (2008, p. 59) contends that "the degree of positive influence of principals was somewhat surprising" but agrees that "… principals can create key roles in creating and maintaining the conditions and environment where teachers can teach effectively, …

students can learn, and exceptional outcomes can occur". Effective leadership requires effort to create the structures and processes which permit teachers to participate as fully as possible in their key tasks (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). These positive views of principal leadership influencing the quality of teaching, learning, learning environments, and learning outcomes are also supported by other influential writers such as DuFour and Marzano (2011), Hutton (2016), Leithwood and Mascall (2008), and Mulford et al. (2009).

Technological and social development have transformed the role of a school principal (Duignan, 2012). Currently, the concept of 'distributed leadership' has gained popularity, on the basis that the principal cannot be sufficiently informed to make all decisions in a school, nor can she/he be present in all places and situations where decisions need to be made (Moos, 2012). Research on distributed leadership suggests that by sharing leadership with a number of key stakeholders, principals can better influence the quality of their learning environments and enhance the quality of student outcomes (Duignan, 2012; Harris, 2006). Therefore, it is very important for principals to forge a collaborative relationship with parents and the wider community who collectively represent diverse ideas and needs (Hutton, 2016).

It is important to keep in mind that while school leadership is essential, consistent and strong leadership at the district level should not be overlooked. Research in North America identifies that "district-level leadership matters" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3) as the district education office creates conditions for principals to become even better leaders to support teachers and students to succeed in the classroom (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Leadership by key district staff is "the essential factor determining the direction and future of schools, school effectiveness, and student achievement as decisions vital to improving educational activities, and instructional processes and contents are made at this level" (McFarlane, 2010, p. 55). In this way the district education offices can lay the groundwork for school leaders by setting clear goals, investing in professional development, setting up advisors for new principals, and elevating the importance of academic achievement. Effective and successful district-level leadership is dependent upon the practices of district-level leaders and how their leadership practices shape school climate and culture, influencing the performances of principals, teachers, and students (McFarlane, 2010). As such, the failure in public schools is related to the ineffectual leadership. In this study, leadership of the DESB is particularly in a position vulnerable to be blamed.

3.2 Importance of capital and habitus for schooling achievement

Sociological explanations of the relationship between the students' academic performance and family background often refer to economic, social and cultural capital (De Graaf, De Graff, & Kraaykamp, 2000). Among these three concepts, cultural capital has become the most popular and has been carefully explored by sociologists of education (Dumais, 2002). That is, students who benefit from the schooling system are those who already possess knowledge and skills acquired at home and similar to those preferred by the schooling system. Bourdieusian theory of social reproduction and cultural capital claims that the educational system favours the upper-class culture which is reproduced in schools. Teachers, who are from middle-class families, prefer the behaviours, styles, and knowledge of children from middle and upper classes (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008). Students must own such cultures in order to feel comfortable, communicate easily with teachers, and probably to do well in school (De Graaf et al., 2000; Thomson, 2002). However, it would appear that this type of culture is not provided by schools but transmitted at home, and is largely dependent on social class (Dumais, 2002). Students from higher socioeconomic status families are already familiar with these social structures; when they enter school grounds, they do not feel school to be a strange place or feel alienated (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). By contrast, working class parents teach their children obedience and knowledge related to their daily livelihood which may be not as useful in school (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008). This is particularly true for rural parents who hold low socioeconomic status and engage in seasonal self-subsistent farming in Lao PDR. Swidler (1986) argues that parents with low socioeconomic status who fail to support their children in schooling achievement do not devalue their children's schooling but lack the skill, habit, and knowledge needed to effectively assist them.

Bourdieu contends that individuals' habitus reproduces social structure because people usually develop belief based on their individual potential. For instance, working-class people are likely to believe that it is impossible for them to escape from their current class identity (Dumais, 2002). This belief is then embedded into practices that lead to the reproduction of the class structure. With reference to the analogy of a game to describe a person's position in a particular field, working-class students are viewed as players in a game who do not clearly understand the rules, although they understand that the final goal of the game is for them to gain a qualification and that the importance of playing a game is to become educated and be competitive for jobs in a knowledge economy (Lehmann, 2012). Individuals' positions in the class system strongly influence their decision to invest in schooling, study hard, and go onto higher education, and shapes their expectations as to whether

they are likely to succeed in schooling (Swartz, 1997). According to (Bourdieu, 1973), the cultural capital they possess affects the development of individuals' habitus; people from the lower class are likely to have undervalued cultural capital and are likely to encounter failure in schooling. Thus, lower-class students are likely to withdraw from the school system because they have a view of what is possible and what is not (Dumais, 2002).

3.3 Roles of education in society

Education is a fundamental human right, recognised by treaties and laws worldwide such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, and Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Sustainable Development Goals up to 2030 policy recognises education's great contribution in providing households with useful knowledge and skills for exercising their full capacity (UNESCO 2014c). The significant contribution of education to the social development is briefly reviewed in the following sections.

3.3.1 Income and economic growth and poverty reduction

Education is a major means for reducing poverty by enhancing individuals' incomes and promoting economic growth (Breton, 2013; Dhillon, 2011). For example, incomes went up with each added year of education: by seven percent in Thailand (Pawasutipaisit & Townsend, 2011); seven percent to 9.5 percent in Angola (Kolstad & Wiig, 2013), and six percent over a seven-year period in Indonesia (McCulloch, Weisbrod, & Timmer, 2007). This is because people who were educated were likely to invest for profit. Economists agree that an essential route to economic improvement process is investing in education or human capital (Breton, 2010, 2013). Breton (2013, p. 136) identifies that highly developed countries have long provided free elementary education to the poor and suggests that "If poor countries wish to achieve high levels of national income, they need to provide public funding for the universal education of the poor, at least at the primary and secondary levels of schooling".

It is logical that while family incomes increase, family poverty automatically decreases. Therefore, the role of education is not only raising households' incomes but also reducing their poverty (Cremin & Nakabugo, 2012; Rolleston, 2011). Evidence from developing countries indicates that any level of schooling decreases the possibility that individuals will fall into a cycle of enduring poverty (Gounder & Xing, 2012; Harber, 2002; Wedgwood, 2007). Raising educational levels for all children and the poor rural households is thus a tool to disrupt the cycle of enduring poverty and is "crucial for the

sustainable reduction of poverty in the long term" (Gounder & Xing, 2012, p. 793). It is important that poverty reduction among rural households is related to boosting farming production and efficiency. An increase in education levels of farmers is strongly associated with the increase in net farming production per acre of land cultivated in India (Panda, 2015), rice productivity and improved technical efficiency in Bangladesh (Asadullah & Rahman, 2009). Raising the average level of schooling of the population contributes vastly to very high macro-marginal economic growth which makes it possible for poor countries to grow very rapidly (Breton, 2013).

3.3.2 Health improvement and disease prevention

Education plays a great role in contributing to health improvement of individual households by informing educated people on how to take preventive measures for specific diseases. The positive relationship between schooling and good health is well documented. In both developed and developing countries, those who are better educated are noticeably healthier, have fewer chronic health problems and their children are also healthier (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2014). Moreover, schooling helps people choose healthier life-styles or better health-related behaviours (Kemptner, Jurges, & Reinhold, 2011; Kenkel, 1991; Peters, Baker, Dieckmann, Leon, & Collins, 2010). Household members who are educated are aware of particular types of diseases and how to prevent them (Peters et al., 2010). In countries where malaria is present, women with at least secondary schooling have been shown to be able to protect their children from contacting it, more efficiently than those without education (Gakidou, 2013; Noor, Omumbo, Amin, Zurovac, & Snow, 2006; Pettifor et al., 2008; Siri, 2014). In some African countries' youth population, research has shown that schooling attainment, completion of lower secondary school, can help dramatically reduce HIV infection among teenagers (Halperin et al., 2011; Santelli et al., 2013). An increase in school enrolments also could result in the decline of HIV infection rate among adolescent women (Bärnighausen, Hosegood, Timaeus, & Newell, 2007; Santelli et al., 2015). Hence, education can contribute to lowering individuals' risk of suffering non-communicable diseases, including heart disease and cancer, by raising awareness of the long-term effects of smoking on health (de Walque, 2007, 2010; Hosseinpoor, Parker, d'Espaignet, & Chatterji, 2011).

3.3.3 Reduction in maternal and infant mortality, and fertility

Providing education for females is an initial step for eliminating maternal and infant mortality and reducing fertility (Duflo, Dupas, & Kremer, 2015; McCrary & Royer, 2011). Literature available from developing countries shows that maternal education has a significant influence on infant and child

mortality (Gounder & Xing, 2012). Amongst Indonesian women, for instance, education attained during their childhood impacts positively on reduced mortality rates among their children (Vogl, 2014). Evidence from Bolivia, Cambodia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicates that the likelihood of mortality for a child born to an educated mother decreased by around 40 percent after the first year (Fuchs, Pamuk, & Lutz, 2010). There is a causal relationship between maternal education and fertility, helping women have fewer children (Rolleston, 2011). An increase in education levels for the female population has helped reduce the fertility rate of some parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe, and it has reduced the fertility rate permanently in Germany (Cygan-Rehm & Maeder, 2013). Each additional year of school reduces the probability of pregnancy by 7.3 percent for women who have completed at least primary education (Ferré, 2009). That is, additional compulsory education of women delays the chances of pregnancy before an appropriate age. Additionally, data from ICF International (2012) suggests that the more educated Cambodian women in 2010 and Nepali women in 2012 were, the lower their fertility rate became.

3.3.4 Peace building

Education is now seen as a transforming process, which is intimately related to the peace building process (Spink, 2005) and can transform a conflict into a more peaceful environment during and after a conflict. In society where there is violent conflict, education can convince pupils that peace can be reached through "interpersonal relationships by emphasising equality in relationships, non-violent interaction, and mediation as a tool for solving conflict" (Lauritzen, 2016, p. 82). In post-conflict recovery, basic education plays a crucial role for inclusion and economic prosperity and provides ways of recognising minority cultures, languages and practices (Barakat, Connolly, Hardman, & Sundaram, 2013; Lauritzen, 2016). Moreover, education contributes to "addressing inequalities, overcoming prejudices, fostering new values", and "educating people about new arrangements for political representation, justice and policing" (Tschirgi, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, it may help to reduce both armed conflict and civil strife more broadly (Urdal & Hoelscher, 2009), contribute to resolving the consequences of complex emergencies, and identify root causes of the conflict (Spink, 2005; Tschirgi, 2011). Education also plays a vital role in providing young people with understanding of violent conflict occurring in their society and possibly contributing toward future peacebuilding (Lauritzen, 2016; Smith, 2010). The significance of education has extra effect on the whole society. All in all, education helps maintain freedom and peace, removing poverty, misunderstanding, discrimination, cultural hatred, and conflict. Education can provide consolation to the aggrieved and teaches the affected people to forgive and forget their unpleasant past.

3.4 Literacy

Literacy has been "absolutely central to education policy, curriculum development, and our everyday thinking about educational practices" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 3). It has evolved from a language system to a cognitive process, and currently, to being understood as a sociocultural practice (Kucer, 2014; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Literacy involves not only a competence with understanding how to deal with the language system but also the cultural and critical knowledge that is pivotal to effective communication (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The evolution of literacy definitions has generated new terms to describe the way term literacy is used and understood. The new terms include literacy as social practice (Gee, 1990, 2015; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997), multiliteracy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), and multimodal literacy (Walsh, 2010, 2011). These terms suggest that everyday social practices using many languages and dialects have broadened the understanding of literacy today (Ashton, Arthur, & Beecher, 2014). Indeed, there is a need for new literacy knowledge elements for the current social, economic, cultural, and political conditions because different literacies are equally necessary in different contexts and for different purposes. The following sections discuss literacy as social practice, multiliteracy, functional literacy, critical literacy, and literacy required for primary education in Lao PDR.

3.4.1 Literacy as social practice

Research on literacy as a social practice emphasises the way individuals engage with their social lives. Here literacy is firmly embedded socially, culturally and historically with the context in which it is learnt (McLachlan, Nicholson, Fielding-Barnsley, Mercer, & Ohi, 2013; Yasukawa, 2014). Literacy is viewed as a social and cultural practice that is fundamentally connected with "ways of talking, thinking, believing, knowing, acting, interacting, valuing and feeling" (McLachlan et al., 2013). The most important aspect of the social practice perspective is that "literacy is understood as a social activity rather than an individual skill" (Crowther & Tett, 2011, p. 135). It is the basis of communication between people in different kinds of interpersonal and social relationships with different purposes, using different literacy skills and practices (Crowther & Tett, 2011). That is, literacy as social practice provides individuals with a greater opportunity to participate in society.

The ideological model views literacy as a set of social practices in particular contexts and related to cultural and power structures in society (Street, 1984). That is, literacy "cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but … relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world" (Hamilton, 2002,

p. 8). As contexts always influence the way people communicate or practice literacy (McLachlan et al., 2013), there are certainly multiple literacies, each with unique practices, norms and relationships (Crowther & Tett, 2011; Yasukawa, 2014). Multiple literacies can be acquired within school and in home, in places of worship, among those living in poverty, in neighbourhoods, and among adults (Kucer, 2014). In this sense, there is an understanding that different people use literacy in different ways for different purposes in different social settings (McLachlan et al., 2013).

Research shows that while students may fail to achieve literacy learning or lack literacy at home, "actually experience lives in which literacy is deeply embedded in familial, community and school relationships" (McLachlan et al., 2013, p. 31). If students possess a type of literacy learnt at home similar to what is required to learn at school, students are more likely to achieve a level of literacy successfully (McNaughton, 2002). Thus educators need to acknowledge types of literacy experiences, 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) that students may acquire outside of school and apply this knowledge to potentially raise students' literacy achievement within the school system.

3.4.2 Multiliteracy

Multiliteracy is often linked to the term 'new literacies', which is related to digital technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The term 'new literacies' means "different things to different people, but, in essence, it can be defined as a way of thinking that centralises the role of digital media in literacy pedagogy" (Hall, 2011, p. 179). As digital technologies proliferate, the range of textual forms has increased (Henderson, 2011). Many people now use a variety of digital texts through electronic devices which are dissimilar to conventional printed texts (Luke, 2007). Globalisation has led to changing notions of literacy dimensions. New technologies are constantly evolving, for example, developments in the internet, email, mobile phones, electronic maps, signs, and advertising, which come with new everyday functional literacies (Makin, Jones-Diaz, & McLachlan, 2007).

Similar to the theory of literacy as a social practice, multiliteracy concentrates on real settings where literacy is practised (Perry, 2012). The difference is that the concept of multiliteracy provides two key ways for making meaning: social diversity and multimodality (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). The social diversity refers to differences in making meaning in various social, cultural or area-particular settings. These differences are increasingly salient to the ways that individuals interact in their everyday lives, make and participate in meanings. The second aspect of meaning-making is multimodality, which is a particularly significant issue, partially as a consequence of new information

and communications media. Multimodality recognises that meanings can be made through a variety of communicative modes such as technological, visual, spatial, audio (Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015; Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), verbal and gestural forms of meaning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Makin et al., 2007). Therefore, multiliteracy supports students to learn to understand different meanings in different cultures and to make meaning through different digital, verbal and gestural forms.

3.4.3 Functional literacy

Functional literacy consists of basic literacy and numeracy plus skills that individuals can apply in "personal, social, economic, and cultural endeavors" (Özenç & Doğan, 2014, p. 2250). It focuses on "the meaning of real-world texts and the ways in which different types of text are structured to serve different purposes", for example, a letter, report, or an advertisement. (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 144). Moreover, it is an emancipatory practice that has links between reading, writing, culture, economy, and politics (Kagitcibasi, Goksen, & Gulgoz, 2005) and includes aspects of information literacy, cultural literacy, and universal literacy (Özenç & Doğan, 2014). Additionally, the term 'functional literacy' refers to how well people can use their reading and writing skills to perform in society, manage information, communicate with others, as well as maintaining skills of lifelong learning required for individuals' daily self-expressions (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002; McDaniel, 2004). Functional literacy supports individuals to participate in a range of activities in society (Papen, 2005). In this sense, it is assumed that functional literacy is linked to the concept of human resource development and that individual skills are connected to the overall performance of society and the nation in terms of modernisation and economic productivity. It enables individuals to access information, acquire knowledge, develop thinking, and increase their employment opportunity and incomes. Conclusively, functional literacy is associated with work-related skills and society's demands on individuals (Papen, 2005).

3.4.4 Critical literacy

A conventional literacy definition in the narrowest sense is, "the ability to read and to write text, to decode, comprehend and to construct words", but in the broader sense, "literacy is social practice, embedded within people's everyday activities" (Ashton et al., 2014, p. 4). There is a connection with critical literacy within broader critical and social theory which evaluates and critiques social and political power in society (Crowther & Tett, 2011; Freire, 1993; Mulcahy, 2010; Yoon, 2016). In addition, both critical literacy theory and sociocultural theory focus on historical, social, and cultural settings in individuals' understanding of the text and of the world (Yoon, 2016). Critical literacy places significant emphasis on inequalities of power in everyday life (Mulcahy, 2010). It aims to

involve students in addressing the four dimensions: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on socio-political issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (Lewison, Flint, van Sluys, & Henkin, 2002, p. 382). For Freire, literacy acquisition is essential for helping the oppressed (working class) to evaluate and critique their world of reality and act against their oppressors (people in power) to transform it. Such transformation attempts to eradicate social injustices and inequalities so as to create better social conditions for all. Critical literacy works toward praxis, which combines reflection and action on the world in order to improve society (Freire, 1993). Critical literacy is required for challenging broader power inequalities "through text, socio-cultural practices, political processes as well as unequal access to material resources" (Crowther & Tett, 2011, p. 135).

Freire's (1993) theory of 'conscientisation' is consistent with critical theory indicating that the social transformation is associated with two key factors: social awareness and critical inquiry. Accordingly, literacy learning must go further than the process of acquiring reading and writing skills. It must contribute to the liberation of man and his full development. This is consistent with the concept of a liberating education that occurs through acts of cognition not through mere transfer of information and facts. Individuals need to acquire critical literacy through reading and writing. The reading process means reflection on, interpretation, theorisation, investigation and questioning of the social world. The writing process means action on and dialogical transformation of that world. Through reading, students are encouraged to critically read both the word and the world of reality. Thus, critical literacy becomes an important tool for liberating people, supporting their involvement in social developments for social change and better living conditions.

3.4.5 Literacy required for primary education in Lao PDR

Seeking the most effective way to support literacy learning is of interest everywhere. For a multicultural and multilingual society like Lao PDR, literacy learning needs to build on local cultures which are close to children's background and recognise that marginalised and rural children's literacy understandings differ from those in the mainstream. Acquiring essential knowledge and skills is necessary for children to effectively participate in all activities in their society. Fundamentally, children need to learn reading, writing and numeracy skills required for schooling success and continuously apply these skills for their own and community improvement. Literacy as social practice elevates students' opportunities to participate in society. The multimodal form of literacy is important for today's children to learn to make meaning through several types of texts in which verbal, visual, gestural, and spatial elements are included. Local children need to have functional literacy to enable

them to contribute to family and society development. Importantly, critical literacy enables children to read the word and the world and helps them understand social inequality and ways to improve it. Rather than encouraging them to critique and act against the political and cultural power, critical literacy identifies problems, their causes, and possible solutions. Involvement in all of the range of literacies discussed above are equally necessary for Lao students to raise their levels of competence to effectively participate in society development.

3.5 Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Since the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000, a number of areas under the development framework have been significantly improved across the globe (United Nations 2015b). However, in many developing countries, there was disproportionate growth as some MDG expectations have not been met, particularly the ones associated with maternal and child health (United Nations 2015b). The new 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has targets, aimed at assisting the least developed countries, particularly those with special circumstances and the most vulnerable groups. The 2030 Agenda extends beyond the MDGs. It not only continues the development priorities such as poverty reduction, health, education, and food security and nutrition but also covers economic, social and environmental development targets. For the next 15 years, the United Nations (2015b) has set 17 sustainable development goals which are included in the 2030 Agenda. Goal 4 is associated with education and offers: "inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO 2015a, p. 14).

Goal 4 highlights the role of education which is central to achieving other SDGs. Recognising the important role of education, Goal 4 aims to change the lives of all individuals, communities and societies, with the view of "no one left behind". It focuses on the "unfinished business" of the EFA agenda and the MDG related to education, addressing national and global educational challenges, and the fact that "education is a public good, a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realisation of other rights" (UNESCO 2015a, p. III). Specifically, Goal 4 has seven targets to be achieved by 2030:

1) ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes;
2) ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education;

3) ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university education;

4) substantially increase the numbers of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, to be able to gain employment, decent work and entrepreneurship;

5) eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations;

6) ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve an acceptable level of literacy and numeracy; and

7) ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development:

   a) Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all;

   b) By 2020, substantially expand global numbers of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, Small Island Developing States and African countries, for enrolment into higher education, including vocational training, information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries; and

   c) By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially for the least developed countries and Small Island Developing States. ((UNESCO 2015a, pp. 10-21))

3.6 Educational disadvantages in developing countries

Education plays a vital role in contributing to a nation's socio-economic development. It is widely regarded as the road to economic growth, the key to scientific and technological advancement, a means to remove unemployment, the foundation of social equity, and the spread of political socialisation and cultural vitality (Chimombo, 2005). For several years, different educational development partners in developing countries have supported developmental programs for basic

education. Although progress has been made in several aspects, many challenges remain unaddressed for families, schools, and the education system.

3.6.1 Family-related challenges

Families may face challenges of poverty and the absence of parental involvement. The UNESCO (2010) report shows that family poverty is one of the most influential and constant variables that contributes to educational marginalisation. Poor households in developing countries have limited financial resources to invest in the education of their offspring. Consequently, many children, particularly girls, leave classrooms to help parents with household and farming chores. For boys, these include tending cattle and engaging in paid work, while girls, collect water and firewood with their mothers. In Southeast Asia, Lee (2016) discovered that approximately 30 percent of households live below the poverty line. Yet education is not viewed as an urgent need by poor families; students have to work to help their family and there is no time to attend school.

Parental involvement, regardless of definition or measurement, positively impacts on student learning success throughout the range of grade levels within the indigenous population (Wilder, 2014). Mbiti (2016) reviews literature from developing countries across the globe and suggests that parents have fewer interactions with their child and teachers about schooling and school functions. Only a minimal number of parents in developing countries know what their child scored on the last test, receive information about their children's learning performance from schools, or the educational financial policy at schools. Moreover, there are limited interactions between parents and schools. It was found that only one-third of parents from developing countries have conversations with teachers (Mbiti, 2016). The frequency of interactions are even lower in India (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glennerster, & Khemani, 2010).

Rural students and parents in developing countries, including most Southeast Asian nations, show little interest in education (Lee, 2016). This may occur because some parents do not see the benefits of enrolling their children into school and is exacerbated by the fact that many school or even university graduates are not employed. In the rural areas of developing countries, girls marry at a young age which challenges their educational development and intensifies a deep-rooted belief that girls' education is less valuable (UNESCO 2010).

3.6.2 School-related challenges

Schools in developing countries such as in Southeast Asia encounter a variety of constraints. Resource constraints continue to threaten educational development in these countries (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). For example, insufficient numbers of classrooms, school buildings and necessary facilities have resulted in some schools organising morning classes for some grades and afternoon classes for other, which decreases classroom teaching time for pupils to around three hours a day (Mbiti, 2016). Another constraint is a teacher shortage resulting in large class sizes. Some African countries have between 40–60 pupils per class, and in Asian countries the average pupil-teacher ratio has been measured at over 40:1 in Cambodia and reaching 90:1 in rural schools in India (Mbiti, 2016). It is common to observe that in some Southeast Asia countries there may be 60 or more students to one teacher per class, and there are many multigrade classes. The shortage is not only related to quantity but also the quality (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). Many Southeast Asian nations are not satisfied with "the quality of their education systems because of factors such as teacher training, lack of teacher motivation, the need for curriculum revision, inadequate facilities and insufficient textbooks" (Lee, 2016, p. 473). Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Myanmar lack teacher standards and have "many unqualified and untrained teachers in their school systems" (Lee, 2016, p. 472). Moreover, "the salaries of teachers are generally low in Cambodia, Indonesia and Lao PDR when compared with other professions thus contributing to the low status of teachers and poor retention in the teaching profession" (Lee, 2016, p. 473). Other limitations to quality teaching and learning relate to a lack of textbooks and learning materials in both number and usefulness (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). Two, three or more students may share one textbook (Mbiti, 2016). Another constraint is related to school leadership and management. In many developing countries, school management capacity is relatively weak (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). Specifically, in many Southeast Asian countries, the leadership and management of education has remained a significant challenge because the education system has expanded "faster than qualified teachers and administrators could be recruited or trained" (Lee, 2016, p. 474).

Many Southeast Asian countries complain about their teachers' lack of enthusiasm which generates an unsatisfactory quality of education (Lee, 2016). For instance, teacher absence is commonplace (Biswal, 1999; Lee, 2016), and poor motivation results in unprofessional behaviours (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). In addition, school inspectors, who check school standards, seem to overlook the most pressing teacher absenteeism issues (Mbiti, 2016). In all developing countries, conventional teaching

practice is aimed at completing the curriculum, regardless of what students actually learn (Mbiti, 2016). The combination of this teaching practice and the progressive promotion policy results in a large percentage of students leaving primary school without basic numeracy and literacy. Generally, lessons by teachers in the developing countries are not interactive. Mbiti (2016, p. 116) observed that "much of the time students are asked to solve problems, while the teachers sit at the front of the room without interacting with the class".

The Government's failure to provide sufficient schools and teachers for all areas is a strong factor in the marginalisation of rural children (Lee, 2016). Distance to school consigns rural children, especially the poor, to limited access to education (Lee, 2016). In countries such as Lao PDR and even Indonesia, low population densities in rural areas mean, children must commute a long way to school, across rivers, forests and difficult terrain. In Lao PDR, a full primary education cycle of five years is less likely to be provided for rural and minority group communities, and rural students enrolled in lower secondary schools have greater distances to travel compared with those located in areas where the dominant group resides (King & van de Walle, 2007).

3.6.3 Corruption in education system

Corruption in education systems in developing countries is prevalent and embedded in a systemic and chronic process, which undermines endeavours to educate their people (Sabic-El-Rayess & Mansur, 2016). A definition of corruption in education system is "the abuse of authority for personal as well as material gain" (Heyneman, 2004, p. 637). Corruption and ineffective use of educational resources are viewed as major barriers to achieving education development goals in various regions of the world (Al-Samarrai, 2006), more noticeably in developing countries (Biswal, 1999; Delavallade, 2006). The impact of corruption could result in "decreased ability to invest in education and limited access to educational services, leading to a lower human capital accumulation" (Dridi, 2014, p. 477). Many countries, particularly the more corrupt ones, seem to fail to achieve most Education for All goals (Dridi, 2013).

There are several forms of corruption occurring at every level of education system and at all steps of service delivery, from teachers' recruitment, promotion and management, to student admissions through to examinations (Stuart-fox, 2006; Transparency International 2015). Even though there may be differences of corruption from case to case, in an education sector, the corruption may occur at the ministry, regional, and school/classroom level (Tanaka, 2001). At the ministry level,

procurement processes and constructions are likely to be involved in corruption. The procurement process staff are bribed in exchange for securing contracts (Heyneman, 2004; Tanaka, 2001). At the regional level, there are several forms of corruption exercised by officials, including embezzlement and misappropriation of budgets allocated for education (Chapman, 2002; Reinikka & Svensson, 2005). Another form of corruption in Lao PDR occurs in the form of accepting bribes for teacher recruitment and promotion to a work position (Stuart-fox, 2006), and collecting illegal, extra school fees in order to compensate for budget deficits (Heyneman, 2004). At the higher education level, bribery for admission can be a customary practice in developing worlds (Heyneman, 2004; Stuart-fox, 2006).

At the school/classroom level, teachers' corruption is one of the most serious issues. Private tutoring is common in developing countries (Biswal, 1999; Heyneman, 2004; Silova, 2010). That is, teachers teach poorly at school but teach well at home in order to encourage students to take private tutoring for their personal income generation (Biswal, 1999; Heyneman, 2004). Paying bribes and giving gifts are commonplace to ensure good grades, promotion to the next grade, and graduation (Chapman, 2002; Heyneman, 2004). Other forms of corruption include selling exam papers before the examination date, changing final results (Heyneman, 2004), and students taking exams for other students (Chapman, 2002). Being more subjective and administered in private, and therefore unaccountable, oral examinations are even more open to corruption.

3.7 Summary

The literature review is firstly concerned with leadership of school principals and district education office leaders as key for improving the schooling system in the district. Then, it synthesises the importance of capital (social, economic, and cultural) and habitus for schooling achievement. Cultural capital is more extensively explored because students who possess this type of capital from home are more likely to achieve educational success than those who do not. Those who possess a school-related habitus also have different ways of thinking about and believing in schooling. Next, the significant roles of education in society are discussed. Its roles include fostering income and economic growth and reducing poverty, improving health and preventing diseases, reducing maternal and infant mortality and fertility, and building peace in conflict areas. After that, different types of literacy are reviewed, such as multiliteracy, functional and critical literacy, which are necessary in different contexts and for different purposes. Also, the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 is also studied. Lastly, educational challenges in developing countries are reviewed and

identified to be related to families, schools, and corruption in the education system. The next chapter discusses the research methodology that is applied in this project.

Chapter 4
METHODOLOGY

This chapter is divided into eight sections. It commences with a discussion of theoretical perspectives (positivism and interpretivism) and the epistemological concepts (objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism) to be used in the interpretation of the data in the researched sites. The second section is about the research design which includes qualitative research, ethnography, and a case study. The third section presents the research method which involves interviews, observation, a focus-group discussion, and document analysis. The fourth section considers the selection of the site with the selection of the district, the schools and villages, and research participants. The fifth section concerns the research procedure which is about the data collection at the DESB, the schools, and the villages. The sixth section is about the data analysis procedure providing three steps: familiarising and organising, coding and reducing, interpreting and representing. The seventh section discusses trustworthiness of the data analysis including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The last section ends with the ethical considerations before, during, and after the data collection.

4.1 Theoretical perspective

Theoretical perspective is "a way of looking at the world and making sense of it" (Crotty, 2010, p. 8). Within social research, the two broad key concepts, positivism and interpretivism, contradictorily attempt to understand and explain human and social reality. The term positivism talks about a social research approach that focuses on scientific evidence to explain the nature of social reality (Bryman, 2008; Crotty, 2010), while an interpretivist approach *"looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world"* (Crotty, 2010, pp. 46, original emphasis). Each of these two perspectives appears to support different types of research. The positivist perspective seems to support quantitative research as it assumes reality as observable, measurable, constant, stable, external, and positions facts as separated from values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). On the contrary, the interpretivist perspective seems to support qualitative research as it accepts reality to be socially constructed, value-laden, complex and continuously changing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study utilises a qualitative approach and fits with the interpretivist perspective of interpreting the data collected in the field.

Interpretivism is an epistemological concept that is established on the assumption that multiple realities are constructed rather than seeking a single objective truth. Denzin (2010, p. 271) argues

that "Objective reality will never be captured. In-depth understanding, the use of multiple validities, not a single validity, a commitment to dialogue is sought in any interpretive study". The interpretivist viewpoint focuses "more on depth of inquiry – particularly personal and shared meaning – and more leeway is given for how data are interpreted and presented" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 7).

4.1.1 Epistemology

Epistemology is "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 2010, p. 9). There are several ontological positions (Bryman, 2008), including objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism (Crotty, 2010). Objectivism accepts that reality as such, is independent of social actors and is waiting to be discovered (Bryman, 2008; Crotty, 2010). Constructionism argues that reality is constructed, not discovered, by social actors through their interaction with and the interpretation of the social world (Bryman, 2008; Crotty, 2010). In a subjectivist viewpoint, reality does not come out of an interaction between social actors and the world but is imposed on the world by the social actors (Crotty, 2010). Of the three paradigms, constructionism best fits this current research. This is because this research is to interpret situations occurring in the DESB, primary school contexts and villages in rural Lao PDR based on the interaction between myself and the phenomena under the study.

Constructionism is defined as the view that *"all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context*" (Crotty, 2010, pp. 42, original emphasis). In the constructionist viewpoint, reality can neither be described simply as 'objective' nor 'subjective'; different people have different interpretations within the same environment (Crotty, 2010; Grbich, 2013). As reality (or meaning) is constructed or made, the construction is continually tested and modified and is based on new experiences of social actors in contexts (Schwandt, 2000).

Meaningful construction is impossible without historical and sociocultural dimensions (Crotty, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Crotty (2010, pp. 38-39) argues, "when we first see the world in a meaningful fashion, we are inevitably viewing it through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture". The individual is "integral with cultural, political and historical evolution, in specific times and places, and so resituates psychological processes cross-culturally, in social and temporal contexts" (Owen, 1995, p. 161). In the case research, this concept is fundamentally important because meaning is constructed based on the shared signs and symbols that are recognised by members of a culture and socially and societally embedded and existing within the mind (Crotty, 2010; Grbich, 2013).

According to Crotty (2010, p. 53), "Without culture we could not function… [because]… we depend on culture to direct our behaviour and organise our experience". In constructing meaning of social reality, thus, it is crucial to understand culture as it indicates the human thoughts and behaviours that determine how a society operates.

4.2 Research design

This project is a qualitative multi-site case study in a bounded context utilising ethnographic methods (Crotty, 2010). It is ethnographic because it studies in depth the behaviours that occur naturally in the DESB, schools and villages. This partial ethnography entails a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the DESB, three schools and three villages in terms of habitus and economic, social, and cultural contents. It is a case study because its scope is limited to the DESB, three primary schools, and the three villages where these three schools are located, all within the one district. Ethnographic research methods can be used by case study researchers to collect extensive data about the case (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

4.2.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is an investigative approach which typically focuses on collecting and analysing data in the form of words rather than numbers (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Bryman, 2008; Rolfe, 2006). This type of research has been used in various fields to answer questions about how individuals organise, relate to, and interact with the environment (Guest et al.). It is used in the social sciences, focusing on "observing, describing, interpreting, and analysing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4). Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) stated that qualitative research is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world". That is, qualitative researchers investigate phenomena that occur in their natural world and try to interpret the world based on interactions and meanings people bring to them. Accordingly, qualitative researchers highlight the reality that is socially created, and the close connections formed between researchers and environments under study. They attempt to gain insights into how social knowledge is shaped and interpreted. In order to construct accurate meanings of the studied world, qualitative researchers employ several interconnected interpretive practices (Crotty, 2010). This is because each practice gives different meanings to different aspects of the world under study.

In this study I investigate the ongoing nature of the DESB, the three primary schools and three villages. I seek the depth and detail of the participants' perspectives in the field by interviewing the key DESB staff, school principals, and village headmen, involving teachers and parents in a focus group discussion, and conducting an observation of the three settings.

4.2.2 Ethnography

Ethnography is a research methodology (Crotty, 1998, 2010). It guides "a researcher in choosing methods and shape[s] the use of the methods chosen" (Crotty, 1998; 2010, p. 3) and has particularly been applied in qualitative research (Serrant-Green, 2007). It aims at describing people's daily practices, belief, and culture (Freebody, 2003; Guest et al., 2013; Harding, 2013; Serrant-Green, 2007). The definition of ethnography is ambiguous and complex as ethnography does not have common characteristics that can be adopted as a "kind of formula [that] will result in a successful ethnography" (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 3). In this study, ethnography will mean the investigation of behaviours and cultures in the natural contexts of the DESB, three primary schools, and three villages in the rural area of Lao PDR. This investigation "seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people's overall worldview or culture" (Crotty, 2010, p. 12). Since ethnography is a process and a product, an ethnographer exposes the fieldwork experience and attempts to become an insider of the culture under investigation (Freebody, 2003; Guest et al., 2013; Tedlock, 2000). "Ethnographers are cross-dressers, outsiders wearing insiders' clothes while gradually acquiring the language and behaviours that go along with them" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). That is, ethnography can help researchers understand participants' behaviours, cultures, and beliefs better than any other approach (Guest et al., 2013; Tedlock, 2000). "Ethnography is also a mixed-method approach to social research in that it often includes other social methods (such as interviews, documentary analysis, and observations)" (Willis, 2013, p. 338). The combination of various research methods can create "historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). Hence, this study employs partial ethnography in order to produce detailed descriptions of the belief systems, values, behaviours and interconnections of whatever has been defined as a 'culture' (Grbich, 2013).

4.2.3 Case study

A case study is "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). It explores phenomena occurring in the natural setting (Guest et al., 2013) and "provides the researcher with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 256). My study is a qualitative case study which will examine the phenomenon of the DESB, three primary schools and three villages with their real-life contexts (Guest et al., 2013). Its attempt is to gain theoretical and professional insights from a full documentation of that case and disseminate the

research to impact upon practice, and to refine the theorisation of practice (Freebody, 2003). The "goal is to arrive at a detailed description and understanding of the case" (Ary et al., 2010).

Stake (2005) identifies three general types of case studies: (1) an intrinsic case study (to understand the particular case holistically); (2) an instrumental case study (a case is studied to generalise or provide insight into a larger topic); and (3) a multiple case study (where multiple cases are studied together to investigate a larger phenomenon or population from which the cases are drawn). The current inquiry fits with the multiple case study carried out in the DESB, three primary schools, and three villages. The primary purpose of this case study is to understand the uniqueness of the cases, and then use the knowledge gained from this case study and apply it to other similar cases and contexts in Lao PDR. The uniqueness of a case study approach is that "it provides the researcher with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 256).

Ethnography and case study share three common characteristics. First, they both focus on a single unit, which includes an individual as well as the whole community, society, or institution (Ary et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Second, both ethnographers and case study researchers make in-depth studies of a phenomenon of interest (a culture or some aspect of culture), study phenomena occurring in their real-life setting, and represent both the subjects' and researchers' perspectives (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). Lastly, ethnography and case study research use multiple methods for collecting data in the field, such as interviews, observations of settings, and document analysis (Ary et al., 2010). Therefore, this case study employs quasi ethnographic methods for collecting the data in the field.

4.3 Research method

In this study, the data collection was primarily through interviews, focus-group discussions, observations, and document analysis. The interviews and focus-group discussions were semi-structured, using general purposeful questions. The questions and points to be covered in the interview are presented in Appendix A for the key DESB staff, school principals, and headmen of villages. The main questions and points to be covered in the focus-group discussions are presented in Appendix B for the teachers and the parents. The observations involved extensive note-taking of strategic events of interest in all three interview fields. I also reviewed administrative and academic documents in the DESB and schools for the purpose of gaining more information, crosschecking and validating the data collected in order to raise the trustworthiness of the findings.

4.3.1 Interview

The interview is one of the most widely used methods for collecting qualitative data (Ary et al., 2010). Case studies often employ interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the research participants (Gall et al., 2005). Semi-structured interviews are usually employed and organised beforehand for a selected time and location outside every day affairs. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 102) suggest that semi-structured interviews as employed in this study "rely on a certain set of questions and try to guide the conversation to remain, more closely, on those questions". In other words, researchers do not plan an interview in detail beforehand; through the course of the interview unplanned questions are related to participants' responses (Ary et al., 2010). The nature of the semi-structured interview is carried out in a conversational fashion in which questions arise from situations (Ary et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Therefore, individual interviewees are quite free to talk about what is interesting and important to them, and researchers may hear unanticipated information from interviewees. Doing this allows the researcher to gain deeper insights into individual interviewees' personal experiences on specific incidents or experiences and to follow any unexpected but potentially significant responses. Gall et al. (2005) assert that interview questions are usually open-ended, meaning that interviewees can answer freely in their own words rather than choosing from alternative answers. To best record the interviews, Hammersley (2006) suggests using a portable audio device which I chose to use during the interviews with the participants.

4.3.2 Focus-group discussion

A focus-group discussion is a method for data collection in qualitative research where researchers discuss concerns with a group of participants, normally at least four people (Bryman, 2008). It is a useful method when there is limited time to collect data and when some participants feel reluctant to share ideas, thoughts, and experiences in one-on-one interviews, and it brings several different perspectives into contact (Ary et al., 2010). In the current study, focus-group discussion is "used to gain understanding of an issue through examination of group participants' perceptions, values, and beliefs" (Willis, 2013, p. 330). In the focus group discussion, I asked the participants a few broad questions and involved them in sharing their ideas and experiences in the setting. Efron and Ravid (2013, p. 105) state, "as the participants respond to each other, they introduce varied points of views, and stimulate and extend each other's thinking, which can yield a broad range of opinions". As this data collection method is very useful, the focus-group discussion is employed in this study to collect data from groups of primary school teachers and parents. There was an expectation that this method could help with gaining comprehensive information and deeper understandings that could form answers to the research questions.

4.3.3 Observation

Observation is a rudimentary form of qualitative data collection. It is one of several important methods of ethnographic research (Guest et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers globally use unstructured rather than a systematic, structured type of observations (Ary et al., 2010). Qualitative observations use words to describe settings and behaviours for understanding the complexity in natural settings with a complete description of behaviours.

In the current study, the observation was carried out at the DESB and three primary schools for a total of 12 weeks. Three weeks were spent at each site – at the DESB and the three primary schools. In the field, my role was the *observer as participant* as I was not really involved in the activities carried out by the DESB. I was known to all people in the research sites as a researcher. The main purpose of observations at the DESB and schools was to identify the form of habitus, social capital, economic capital and cultural capital embedded in those contexts.

4.3.4 Document analysis

Qualitative researchers may use written documents to gain insights into phenomena under study. The term 'documents' refers to the variety of "written, physical, and visual materials, including what other authors may term *artefacts"* (Ary et al., 2010). In this study, document analysis is of written or text-based artefacts including school reports and plans, the DESB report and plan, and student statistics. Gall et al. (2005) mention that written communications that are found in field settings are often studied by case study researchers. Most researchers also gather information from documents to understand, validate, and confirm the data from the interviews and observations (Flick, 2002).

4.4 Selection of the research site and participants

This section explains the reasons for selecting this district, and the schools and villages. It also explains how participants were chosen. The details are provided in three subsections below.

4.4.1 Selection of the district

I selected Atsaphangthong district as my research site for three reasons. First, this district is a place where I was born, grew up and completed upper secondary school. I am familiar with the geographic location and socio-cultural environment in this area better than any others in rural areas of Lao PDR. I believe that my familiarity with the geographic location and culture in the area could facilitate me to more easily access the information required and interpret the information and situations accurately. Second, this district stands at the middle-tier position in terms of economic and

educational status, compared with other rural districts in the same province and other provinces in the country. This district is also considered rural but not isolated. It could well represent other districts with similar characteristics in rural areas of Lao PDR. The final reason pertained to accessibility. This district was located on a main road which made access easy and safe.

4.4.2 Selection of schools and villages

The key criteria for selection of the schools included their easily accessible location and educational outcomes such as low student enrolment and retention rates. In the first instance, I decided to select one school in the town, one outside the town in the north, and one in the south of the district to represent schools in each location. I selected the schools that had problems of student enrolment, retention, and high dropout and whose location was near the main road, and so easily and safely accessible by motorcycle. The final confirmation of the school selection was made by the school principals and headmen of villages who granted me permission to conduct my research.

The primary school in the town (hereafter referred to as School One) was selected to represent those located in the best socio-economic environment in the district. It was near the DESB and in terms of academic and administrative work, had the best educational reputation. It is the DESB's intention to establish it as a model primary school.

The primary school located in the northern part of the district (hereafter referred to as School Two) and the one in the south (hereafter referred to as School Three) were selected to represent schools in their rural settings. For the village selection, once the schools were determined, the villages in which the schools are located were automatically involved. Hereafter, the villages in which School One, School Two, and School Three were located are referred to as Village One, Village Two, and Village Three respectively.

4.4.3 Selection of research participants

In total there were 39 people involved in this study. They were six key DESB staff[17], three school principals, nine teachers, three headmen of villages, and 18 parents in three villages. The six key DESB staff, school principal, teachers, and headmen of villages were selected because they were in a position that could provide the most accurate information required for answering the research questions. The 18 parents – six from each village – were introduced by the headmen of villages based on the criteria that three parents currently had children in primary school and another three

[17] The key DESB staff include those who are in leading positions such as the director, deputy directors, and heads of units.

had primary-school-age children who were never enrolled into school or had recently dropped out of school.

The six key DESB staff including the director, two deputy directors and three heads of units were selected for the face-to-face interview. In the DESB, there were in total 40 staff; all of whom were involved in daily observations.

School One had six female teachers. One was in the first year of a probationary teaching period[18]. The others had teaching experience of at least 15 years. The principal was interviewed, and four teachers were involved in the focus-group discussion. School Two had five teachers. Two of whom were male including the principal who had more than 20 years of teaching experience and the deputy principal who had taught for five years. The principal and deputy principal were interviewed individually at a time convenient for them. Two young female teachers had taught for two years, while one young female teacher had just started her teaching job in the last few months. Only the two young female teachers who had two years of teaching experience participated in the focus-group discussion.

School Three had three teaching personnel – a male principal, a male deputy principal, and a female teacher – who all had at least five years of teaching experience. Individuals were interviewed at a convenient time. There was no focus-group discussion in this school. Social and physical environments such as classroom teaching, facilities, activities, and other interesting phenomena in Schools One, Two, and Three were also observed.

The headman of each village was involved in a face-to-face interview. The six parents from each village were involved in two focus-group discussions, meaning that each focus-group discussion involved three parents. The gender of those involved, fathers or mothers was not controlled. Table 4.1 on the following page presents research participants, research instruments, and research sites or cases.

[18] Teachers have to work for at least two years without pay to wait for recruitment.

Table 4.1: Research participants and instruments

Instrument	**DESB**	**School**	**Village**
Interview	6 key DESB staff	3 principals 2 deputy principal[1] 1 teacher[1]	3 village headmen
Focus-group discussion		6 teachers[2]	18 parents
Observation	All staff	All teachers	
Document analysis	Administrative and academic documents	Administrative and academic documents	

Note:

[1]The deputy principal in School Two, the deputy principal and the teacher in School Three were interviewed individually based on their convenience.

[2]Four teachers in School One and two teachers in School Two were involved in a focus-group discussion.

4.5 Research procedure

Prior to data collection activities in the research site, three permission letters were required. The first letter was granted by the Research and Academic Service Office (RASO) in the National University of Laos (NUOL), the second by the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS), and the last one was granted by the DESB. The formal process to obtain the letters was as follows. Contact was first made with the RASO via emails and telephone calls. Then I submitted my research proposal and the letter of request signed by my workplace authority to the RASO. After the RASO granted written permission to ethically approve my research project, the rector of the NUOL issued a letter to the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) in the researched province to introduce me and my research project. After receiving a permission letter from the PESS, I presented it to the DESB, where I was granted the third permission letter.

The process of obtaining these documents was completed prior to receiving the research ethics approval from the Flinders University. That is, two permission letters from the RASO and the DESB were a required inclusion in the application for the research ethics approval from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. After receiving the Research Ethics Approval, I travelled to the research site in Laos, and the data collection process began.

4.5.1 Data collection at the DESB

I first met with the DESB director on Monday morning, 19 October 2015. At the meeting, I introduced myself; explained my role, purpose and activities; provided the Letter of Introduction, Information Sheet, Permission Letter from the DESB, and copies of the Consent Form; and explained how the research would be managed including issues of confidentiality and anonymity. I called this process an *introductory session* and used it thereafter. Then, the director assigned the head of the Administrative Unit to be my assistant during my field work in the district. After I asked to review student statistics, my assistant included the head of Pre-school and Primary Education Unit in a meeting where I again conducted the *introductory session*. Following that, they both helped me with accessing administrative and academic documents.

I spent three weeks in the DESB conducting interviews and observations. The interviews started in the second week after reviewing the documents and scheduling with the interviewees. Before the commencement of each interview, I conducted the *introductory session* with them. The observations commenced on the first day of my visit until my last day at the DESB. To record what was going on in the DESB daily, I made extensive fieldnotes. During my time at the DESB, I also had casual conversations with some staff who provided me with some useful information to support my understanding about issues and challenges within the DESB.

4.5.2 Data collection at schools and villages

The three primary schools are in three different villages. The data collection at the schools and villages took place during the three-week visit to each school. I collected data from both the school and the village.

- **School One and Village One**

The data collection at School One took place between Monday 9 November 2015 and 27 November 2015. On the first morning, I met the school principal. As usual, I began with the *introductory session*, while other teachers were in their teaching classrooms. The interview with the principal was

scheduled for the following week after she had read the research documents provided in the introductory session. I conducted the *introductory session* with all teachers after the afternoon classes in the first week of my visit, and the focus-group discussion took place in the second week. The observation of the school environment, classroom teaching and student learning began on the first day of my being there and continued for three weeks.

During this three-week visit, I met with the head of Village One in the first week and had an interview with her in the following week. I also conducted the *introductory session* and then requested that she select three parents who currently had children in primary school and three parents whose primary-school-age children had recently dropped out of primary school to participate in the focus-group discussion with me. The head of the village made appointments with the six parents who agreed to attend the focus-group discussion in the evening. The focus-group discussion with the two groups of parents was completed in the last week of my visiting schedule.

- **School Two and Village Two**

My visit to School Two and Village Two was from 30 November 2015 to 18 December 2015. On the first day, I went directly to the primary school, but I met only the deputy principal. The principal was away for a week for his mother's funeral. I went through the *introductory session* with the deputy principal under a big tree and scheduled an interview in the first week.

I then went to see the headman of the village. At the meeting, I made an appointment with him for an interview in the first week. I requested his help with selecting three parents whose children were in primary school and another three parents whose primary-school-age children recently had dropped out of school or were not enrolled in school. The headman of the village made an appointment with the parents for the focus-group discussions with me in the second week of my visit. In the second week, I also had an interview with the principal and focus-group discussion with the two young female teachers outside of the school during lunch time.

- **School Three and Village Three**

My visit to School Three and Village Three was from Monday 21 December 2015 to 8 January 2016. During the first morning at this school, I met all three teachers sitting in front of the school building under the small mango tree. I took that opportunity to conduct the *introductory session* before their classes started. After the afternoon class, I made an appointment with the principal for an interview which occurred in that same week. In the first week, I had interviews with all three teachers but on

different days. The principal and one teacher were interviewed at school, but the deputy principal was interviewed outside of school during lunch time.

On the second day of my visit, I went to meet the headman of the village, but he was not at home. I learnt that he was not in good health and usually lived in the town with his daughter to be closer to hospital. He came to his village only when there were important meetings, festivals, villagers' weddings, and other communal activities. Therefore, the deputy head of the village helped me with selecting the parents who met the same criterion as those in Village One and Two to participate in the focus-group discussion. I had the interview with the headman of the village in the town after I had made an appointment with him by phone.

As at the two previous schools, I observed and made notes of the school's internal and external environments. The internal environments included teaching classes, teacher-student interactions, classroom resources, seat availability, and teaching-learning material availability. The external environments included the condition of school buildings, extracurricular activities, and parents' visits to school.

4.6 Data analysis procedure

"Data analysis is the most complex and mysterious phase of qualitative research" (Ary et al., 2010). In qualitative data analysis, the main purpose is to make meaning from the data (Willis, 2013). The data analysis includes minimising and organising data, synthesising, and looking for what is important; researchers must organise what they have "seen, heard, and read and try to make sense of it in order to create explanations, develop theories, or pose new questions" (Ary et al., 2010). While researchers analyse data, they "take note of personal, conceptual, or theoretical ideas or reflections" which come to mind; the note can be made while writing up fieldnote or transcribing interviews (van den Hoonaard & van den Hoonaard, 2008, p. 187). The note may include "researchers' guesses about what is going on, questions raised by the data, or links to literature that may be useful in helping researchers to interpret the data" (van den Hoonaard & van den Hoonaard, 2008, p. 187).

The work of qualitative data analysis is considered overwhelming, but it can be manageable when it is broken down into key stages. Ary et al. (2010) break the qualitative data analysis down into stages: familiarising, coding, reducing, interpreting, and representing. These stages of the data analysis have been employed in this research project. Prior to learning about each stage in analysing

the qualitative data, understanding techniques in transcribing data is also indispensable. Ary et al. (2010) suggest direct transcription of words to avoid possible biases in selection or interpretation. In the current study, translating and transcribing have been done simultaneously. I have tried to translate every word and phrase to ensure the accurate meaning conveyed from Lao to English language. While transcribing, information that might link to the interviewees has been removed from the transcripts to preserve confidentiality. The interviewees' names have also been represented by pseudonyms.

The first step in analysing qualitative data involves becoming familiar with and organising data (Ary et al., 2010). To be familiar with the data, I read and reread the transcripts and listened repeatedly to the audio record to develop a deeper understanding about the data, thought about it, and marked up the text by highlighting what was felt important and made notes in the margins (Benaquisto, 2008; van den Hoonaard & van den Hoonaard, 2008). While I was reading the transcripts several times, categories and themes began to emerge in my mind.

After familiarisation with the data, the coding process commences. The coding process refers to the steps I took to identify potentially interesting events, features, phrases, behaviours, and ideas uncovered in the data. I kept notes on insights, ideas, patterns, and connections that occurred to me as I read and reread the data. "Code notes help the researcher to keep track of the emergent definitions of codes and their distinctive criteria" (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 86). I did the coding of the transcripts rigorously line-by-line and sentence by sentence to identify every empirical and conceptual instance in each line. I sometimes coded whole paragraphs or groups of sentences at a time. Ary et al. (2010) suggest that the initial codes may be the same as respondents' actual words or created by the researcher in several ways to express an underlying concept, or the researcher probably starts with "a set of a priori concepts derived from the literature that are used as codes" (p. 484).

After the coding process, the number of the codes is reduced into fewer categories or themes. At this stage, I grouped all the codes having similar ideas together to create preliminary analytic categories. After that, the categories were reconsidered to see if some categories could be put together to form major categories or themes. Themes are abstract ideas created from a few more literal categories; the themes need to be relevant to all topics in the data as fully as possible (Seale, 2012). The coding process, and development and categorisation of the themes are repeated for each set of data.

Interpreting refers to the process I took to understand the meaning from the collected data. There is no set of rules for interpreting qualitative research to follow (Ary et al., 2010; Firmin, 2008). Interpreting qualitative findings begins with researchers' personal assumptions concerning to the world, life, and people (Firmin, 2008). The quality of the interpretation thus depends upon researchers' backgrounds, perspectives, knowledge, theoretical orientations, and intellectual skills (Ary et al., 2010). In this study, I used my prior contextual experience and knowledge to form my initial interpretation of the data.

'Representing' is the term which means the full understanding of the research participants' experiences including the realities, interpretations, and voices emerging from all participants and all angles (Davis, 2008). Qualitative researchers need to ensure that they sufficiently represent the voice of the participants and the setting under study and describe the lived experience that truly exists to the people being studied Patton (2002). As the research district is my home district, my prior knowledge and experience of the context provided sufficient understandings of the researched context and the participants' lived experience.

4.7 Trustworthiness

The "trustworthiness of results is the bedrock of high quality qualitative research" (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, p. 1802). The term 'trustworthiness' is employed to portray quality in qualitative research, which is represented by the term credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability (Bryman, 2012; Elo et al., 2014; Given & Saumure, 2008).

4.7.1 Credibility

The term credibility is frequently employed by qualitative researchers. Jensen (2008b, p. 139) defines it as "the methodological procedures and sources used to establish a high level of harmony between the participants' expressions and the researcher's interpretations of them". Credibility is a responsibility that qualitative researchers take to improve consistency in their papers, and it is related to the truthfulness of the findings based on the research design, participants, and the context (Jensen, 2008b). To enhance the credibility of the study, Morse (2015) recommends the following strategies which include triangulation, peer review or peer debriefing, member checking, thick description, extended fieldwork, control of bias, and negative case analysis.

In this study, while I was in the process of transcription, telephone calls with participants assisted with clarification or further explanation of some points in the transcripts of the interviews and focus group discussions. In addition, this study intends to provide a thick description of the context in

which this study was conducted in order to create a full picture of the culture and social lives of people in the fields.

4.7.2 Dependability

The term "dependability" refers to consistency and/or replicability of data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Jensen, 2008c; Morse, 2015). This means the findings "should be consistently linked to disclosed data and the findings should be an accurate expression of the meanings intended by the participants. For this to happen, there must be a research infrastructure to support a repetition or replication of the study that will have similar results" (Jensen, 2008c, p. 209). Some strategies to enhance dependability include an audit trail/thick description, corroboration, consistent findings, and coding agreement/coding system, and using an audit trail is one of the best way to establish dependability (Ary et al., 2010; Morse, 2015). As this study employs audit trail or a thick description as methods, the transparent description of the research steps taken from the beginning of this study to the development and reporting of findings could offer the possibility for replication of this study and gaining of consistent findings.

4.7.3 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which "the results of the research can be transferred to other contexts and situations beyond the scope of the study context" (Jensen, 2008d, p. 886). The similarity between the context under study and other contexts allows transferability of findings. To enhance transferability in qualitative studies, researchers need to describe the context and participants in sufficient detail to enable readers to ascertain transferability (Ary et al., 2010; Jensen, 2008d). From exploring the research detail, readers can determine if the findings are transferable to their context. Thus, the researcher is responsible for painting a full picture of the context and ensuring transferability. There are two strategies employed in this study for enhancing the finding transferability. One is a thick description: providing "readers with a full and purposeful account of the context, participants, and research design"; the other is "purposeful sampling": selecting participants based on their best representation of "the research design, limitations, and delimitations of the study" (Jensen, 2008d, p. 887). With a thick description, readers can make judgements whether the findings of this study are transferable to other milieux.

4.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research deals with the idea of neutrality or the extent to which the research is free of bias in the procedures and the interpretation of research results (Ary et al., 2010). That is, qualitative researchers are concerned with whether the data they collect and the conclusions

they draw would be confirmed by others investigating the same situation. Confirmability, from Jensen's (2008a) viewpoint, relates to providing evidence that the findings and interpretations are generated from the participants' constructions. In essence, "confirmability can be expressed as the degree to which the results of the study are based on the research purpose and not altered due to researcher bias" (Jensen, 2008a, p. 112).

Strategies for improving confirmability include the audit trail, control of bias, method triangulation, and peer review (Ary et al., 2010; Jensen, 2008a). In this study, control of bias was applied although it is impossible to be completely objective in social research (Bryman, 2012). I have tried to be honest and clear in the documents necessary for data collection process, data analysis, and coding. During the data transcription and coding, I had several contacts with the participants for clarification and confirmation of my understanding and interpretation.

4.8 Ethical consideration

Qualitative research can be an intrusive method (Patton, 2002) because this method gathers participants' personal information and their individual experiences. There may be potential harm to them, so it is necessary for the researcher to respect "informants' rights" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 90). This research attempted to mitigate any negative consequence arising from the study.

To ensure that the conduct of this research was ethical, two letters requesting ethics approvals were sought from two universities, one in Australia and the other in Lao PDR. The first letter granted ethics approval from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. The second letter gave permission and was issued by the Research and Academic Service Office, National University of Laos. Additionally, two other permission letters were sought from the Provincial Education and Sports Service and the District Education and Sports Bureau.

Agreement and signed consent forms were sought from all participants, who were informed of the purposes of my study, the data collection methods and the times involved in this undertaking as participants. All of the data was treated as confidential and I have maintained the anonymity of the participants in the study. All information provided by them was used solely for the proposed research and was securely stored in my personal computer to ensure privacy for all participants. The participants were informed of their right to refuse or withdraw before or during the interviews or observations without any conditions and consequences if any of them may have felt uncomfortable and unhappy with my research activities.

4.9 Summary

This study utilises a qualitative approach and fits with constructionism and interpretivism perspectives of interpreting the data collected in the field. A quasi-ethnographic case study design was employed to explore what went on in the three fields (the DESB, primary schools, and villages). Semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and document analysis were instruments for the data collection. The district was selected based on my familiarity with the site, the district's middle-tier position in terms of economic and educational status, and accessibility. The three schools were selected based on their easily reached location and educational outcomes such as low student enrolment and retention rates. The villages in which each selected school was located were automatically selected.

The data analysis procedures include familiarising, coding, reducing, interpreting, and representing the data. To portray quality in the research, credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability were taken into account. The next three chapters, Chapter 5, 6 and 7 present analysis of the data from the three villages, the three primary schools, and the DESB respectively.

Chapter 5
THREE VILLAGES

Data analysis for the research project covers three chapters. This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from headmen of villages and parents in the three villages which are represented by labels: Village One, Village Two, and Village Three. In each of the villages, the headmen of villages helped the researcher with the selection of parents for the focus group discussions, contacting and making appointments with them. The headmen of villages were interviewed individually, while the parents participated in discussion in groups of three at the homes of the village headmen. The participants' names are represented by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. The number in the bracket after each name indicates the line number in the interview transcripts.

5.1 Village One

This village is within the part of the town where the DESB office was located. The village had 257 families with a total population of 1285, of whom 938 were female. About half of the population were working for the government and included soldiers, police officers, teachers, medical nurses, and office staff. Others were farmers, small business workers, and labourers. Some of the government staff were also rice farmers, and some ran a small business at home selling food, drinks, liquor, confectionary, snacks, tobacco, toiletries, for household use while others sold these goods or clothing in the market. The demographic of this village showed relatively mixed groups of people moving within and outside the district with their work. Some like the military families came from different provinces, but while the parents were employed soldiers, they were less likely to migrate because there was no war or political conflict in the country. Therefore, within the village population, there was a mixture of subcultures, beliefs, lifestyles, and parenting styles among the parents.

Village One forms half of the town with another village, and the two are divided by the main road. Village One is on the southern side of the main road while the other, the main village of the town, is on the opposite side. This main road runs from the provincial capital city up to the east of the province connecting many districts. The town citizens can easily access the city by good transportation links. Village One has grown in number of houses because of the population growth. Also located in Village One are the district governance office, post office, hospital, and two small army bases as were the DESB, market, and banks. However, no higher education school exists and there is very limited employment in the district.

Data collected showed there was wide disparity of family incomes among the population in the town as well as in Village One. The different types of employment available such as government work, business, farming, and labouring generated different incomes. In the town, the wealthiest families were business people, whereas the poorest ones were labourers who did not have stable incomes. However, there were not many business people who had high incomes but rather had small business and subsistence incomes. Small business and many government workers also participated in seasonal rice farming.

5.1.1 Headman of village

The head of village, Lin, was female and also the president of the VEDC (Village Education Development Committee). She had been in the position for six years and was previously a deputy headwoman. Lin felt that all parents, both poor and wealthy in the village, recognised the importance of education and wanted their children to be in school. Most families had sufficient financial capital and were equally willing to support their children's schooling until completion of some level of higher education with the view of them obtaining a paid job afterwards. However, even though many children had completed and graduated from vocational schools or teacher training college, they remained unemployed, causing a sense of futility in the village and district. Due to the lack of social and economic capital for negotiating recruitment opportunities, farming families were particularly disadvantaged.

As the president of the VEDC, Lin played several roles in helping the school improve the students' enrolment, retention, and academic performance (ERA). Before the start of each new school year, the school principal and the VEDC met to discuss which aspects of the school program needed to be developed. The school principal and the VEDC's joint plan was then implemented in the school. In addition, the VEDC was responsible for school facilities and properties during school breaks. At the beginning of the new school year, the VEDC's specific role was to encourage village parents to enrol their school-aged children. During the school year, the VEDC only responded to the school principal's requests such as disseminating any school information to the parents.

The Parent Association, affiliated with the VEDC, also helped with encouraging parents to enrol their children and collecting the statistics for each age group. These statistics were then shared with the school. If the school informed the VEDC that some children were not enrolled, frequently absent, or at risk of dropping out, the Parent Association visited the parents to determine the reasons and encourage the parents to pay more attention to their children's schooling. Lin confirmed that all 6-

10-year-old children in this village were enrolled in school and had observed that the children were eager to go to school when they saw their friends attending.

Lin was unaware of the school goals and was not involved in the development of the school policies but was able to review them. Some excerpts from the school rules included, 'students must wear school uniform, attend class on time, refrain from bullying and fighting with a peer at school, etc.' But Lin was not aware of punitive measures for students who violate the school rules. In the implementation of the school development plan, there was no monitoring by the VEDC to ensure the school implemented the plan effectively because the school did not invite the VEDC to see it. Lin stated that if the school did not ask for help or advice, the VEDC did nothing in relation to education matters. If the VEDC interfered with the school's responsibilities, the VEDC might be seen as too officious and the school may resent the intrusion.

It seemed that the VEDC did not play a significant role in relation to school development in the village, apart from sharing ideas about the school planning development with regard to its physical environment, maintenance, dissemination of school information to parents, and collection of school-aged children's statistics. The social network of connections between the two stakeholders was variable.

From the data analysis, the challenges found related to the children's families and the school they attended. Lin stated that approximately five or six families were considered poor because in the face of natural disasters, there was not sufficient rice for their family's consumption. Farmers, particularly those who faced financial hardship, were less likely to support their children's education, particularly at the commencement of a new school year when their children needed new school uniforms, new stationery, and school fees. Parents who had more than one child in school faced greater financial pressure to provide the required material goods. Lin said:

> I heard one parent complaining that her son wanted to have an expensive motorbike the same make as his friends' motorbike. Her son sometimes did not want to go to school. My daughter also wanted me to buy her a new expensive mobile phone just like her friends had. I did not buy her one, but I tried to encourage her and explain why it is not necessary for her. (Lin – 65-68)

In this quotation, Lin was describing a student and also her daughter who were both in lower secondary school. Certainly, parents with limited financial capital, were unlikely to buy expensive

motorbikes or smart phones[19], as they struggled to cover other expenses such as younger siblings' schooling costs. This quotation also epitomised educational expenses that place a heavy burden on poor parents. If they had more children in secondary school, their expenses would increase further.

During the harvesting season, some children often missed classes because they stayed on the rice farm helping their parents with the rice harvesting. If the farm was too far for the children to walk, they might be away from school for the whole season or about a month.

Lin believed that sometimes teachers treated students unfairly causing some students to miss classes and eventually they dropped out. The situation was compounded by the fact that teachers did not report the students' low learning performance to the VEDC until they failed the final exam. It was officially the teachers' responsibility to report the learning performance of the students to the VEDC and when made aware, the VEDC informed parents. Likewise, parents may not have known anything about their children's learning performance either. Lin complained that, though she is a president of the VEDC, without knowing the situation in advance, she has not been able to do anything to help those children as it was usually too late to do so.

5.1.2 Parents with children in school

Three parents who had children in primary school met with me in a focus group discussion. Phengta, Sengdao, and Manivan all had secure and paid jobs as government staff.

- Phengta was a female soldier with three children. One was in primary school and two were in upper secondary school.
- Sengdao was a female soldier. She had three children all of whom were in primary school.
- Manivan was a father working in the IT centre of the district governance office. He had five children: two in primary school; two in secondary school; and one had just graduated from Teacher Training College in the province.

The three parents had positive attitudes toward education. Phengta acknowledged that education was very important and the major means of progress. Education offered access to a wide range of benefits for society, and everything was developed under the auspices of education. With education,

[19] These material goods are not important for school but important for children to commute and to encourage children to go to school. Some children in these villages want their parents to buy a new motorbike for them, the same make as their peers at school; otherwise, they do not want to attend school.

people became resourceful and contributed to societal growth. As such, two parents expected their children to complete not just general education, but also to accomplish higher education, and continue further (Phengta and Manivan). Although it was difficult to get a paid job, Manivan wanted his children to complete higher education. He understood that every position would be vacant one day as staff became older and retired. Jobs were always available for upcoming generations. His intention was to support his children's education regardless of job scarcity. This demonstrated that these parents possessed habitus and sufficient cultural capital related to the education system and employment opportunities for their children.

- **Parents' complaints about the school system**

Most complaints from parents were about the system that required them to contribute some money to the school. Manivan objected saying:

> To organise any events in school, the students are required to contribute some money to support it. We all know that our children cannot make money by themselves, so it means that we are required to contribute money. For example, when the school holds a New Year's party, the students are asked to contribute some money to support that celebration. Also, each family is requested to contribute some money to help school. There is no decree from the government about collecting money from students to support school activities. It is not clear if this ongoing practice is from the province, the district or the school. In fact, in a village meeting, all agreed that each family needs to contribute some money to the school, and I think that it is appropriate. But what I question is whether collecting money from the students, mainly the primary students, is reasonable. (69-83)

This practice placed stress on low income parents, who struggled to provide even small amounts of money. They contributed funds to the school without knowing clearly how the collected money was managed and used. Furthermore, three parents were frustrated in being pressured to buy gifts for the teachers. Phengta claimed:

> I feel dissatisfied when my children ask me for some money to buy gifts for their teachers. For example, on the National Teacher's Day, some teachers told their students to give them cash instead of gifts. My children tell me about their friends who bought a silk skirt for their teachers. If the teachers have never said this to their students, where do my children hear those words from? (210-215)

Giving a gift to teachers has always been a norm in school culture in Lao PDR, and the teachers very familiar with the culture of receiving gifts. This embodiment of school culture has been always considered as a kind of habitus in the school system. Every student in this school system has internalised this habitus and feels uncomfortable if they did not have anything to present to their teachers on the important day. Even if the teachers do not mention it, students are aware of this norm. While some teachers might take the opportunity to impose this tradition on their students,

the practice occurs mainly in cities, so it was therefore surprising to hear of this happening in School One located in a small town. Nevertheless, the giving of gifts to teachers has increased schooling costs for parents and further dissatisfaction.

Phengta's daughter was ranked top in her class and was asked to supply a gift by her teacher. While it was just the teacher's sense of humour, the student took it seriously. The dilemma Phengta faced was that if she did not buy the gift, her daughter might feel uncomfortable in front of her teacher and disappointed with her mother. In another incident at the school, a student failed the final academic test but was eventually promoted to the next grade because the parents bought gifts for the teacher. Thus, the norm of gift giving to teachers has become a corruption issue at classroom level and has impacted the process of education improvement in the district.

The parents felt that teachers had more authority than parents over their children. That is, their children listened to their teachers rather than their parents. Phengta said:

> The children are sometimes requested to help their teachers with harvesting rice. I think that kind of work is not appropriate for the children who are too young. My daughter never refuses any teachers' requests because she is afraid that, if she does not help, her marks will be cut. I sometimes tell her not to go, but she ignores my word and is willing to help her teachers. Frankly speaking, I am not happy with exploiting my child's labour. I do not want my child to go to harvest the rice because she is still young. Even at home I never let her do this type of work when she helps me. (24-32)

From personal experience, helping teachers with harvesting rice has been embedded in school culture for a long time. It has become one of the most common extracurricular activities for students in the region. In rural villages it is normal for parents to see their children help their teachers with harvesting rice or doing other work. During the rice harvesting season, some teachers (including principals) do not have classes for one or two days a week. They take their students to their farms to harvest rice. Reduced class time impacts on the time for teachers to complete the curriculum and for the students to practise academic skills.

- **Parental involvement in children's schooling**

The three parents had relatively sound involvement in their children's schooling when at home. Every day the parents would talk about benefits of education to their children. Manivan claimed that as there were many social problems occurring now, children should always be educated by parents to shape their minds and behaviours, to comply with acceptable social norms and become respectable members of society. After dinner, the three parents instructed their children to study and complete homework. In Phengta's case, the parents were less educated, so the older sibling helped the

younger sister with studying and doing homework. Phengta even ate less to save money for the children's education. In Sengdao's family, the children were still young so it was usually the parents who supervised their homework. All three families made decisions about their children's friendship groups, not allowing them to socialise with delinquent peers. Manivan recognised that if the parents had a weak relationship with their children, there was a high probability they would misbehave in the community and become a problem to the parents. It was also clear that the three families had strong and healthy relationships among family members. That is, the social capital derived from family relationships was essential for the children to acquire home cultural capital which then formed their schooling habitus.

In contrast, there was a limited relationship between teachers and parents. Phengta and Sengdao, suggested that unless there were matters pertaining to the children's schooling, they did not contact the teachers and vice versa. Only when meeting by chance in a public place, did they have an opportunity to converse with the teachers about their children's learning. The three parents agreed that teachers rarely invited them to joint school activities. However, parents of students who were regularly absent from classes were invited to school to talk about their children's learning issues. Parents whose children rarely missed classes were never invited to the school.

5.1.3 Parents whose children's school attendance is classified as 'out-of-school[20]'

This section presents the data analysis collected from the three parents whose children have recently dropped out of school. All three parents were involved in the focus group discussion, but they did not specifically interact. Therefore, the data provided by each parent has been presented separately. The parents – Pathana, Sonphet, and Chanthy – were all farmers.

- Pathana was a mother who dropped out of lower secondary school. She has only son who recently dropped out of Grade 2 of primary school.
- Sonphet was a father who was a deputy village head. He has three children. The youngest son recently dropped out of Grade 1. The two daughters were in lower secondary school.
- Chanthy was an illiterate aunt responsible for two nieces. One was under-school-aged, and the other recently dropped out of Grade 3 of primary school.

[20] The term 'out-of-school' in this study refers to school-aged children who are never enrolled in school and those who dropped out after their enrolment.

Although their children were not in school, the three guardians had positive attitudes towards education and wanted their children to return to school and complete some level of education. They communicated that:

> No one wants their children to be illiterate. We want our children to go to school in order that they will be knowledgeable in the future. (Chanthy, Sonphet, Pathana – 73)

Two of the parents expected their children to complete at least Grade 7 of upper secondary school and were willing to support their children if they went back to school. Chanthy said that when seeing other children wearing uniforms, it made her feel proud of them and she wanted to see her niece also wearing a school uniform.

The three guardians agreed that all the teachers were very considerate. The parents were impressed that when their children were absent, the teachers came to visit their homes to encourage the children to go to school. After the class was finished in the afternoon, the teachers phoned the parents to check whether their children had arrived home. Chanthy said that the teachers paid close attention to their students, but the children were not learning anything. The three guardians praised teachers for their responsiveness but blamed their children for their ignorance.

According to the three guardians, the reasons for their children dropping out were related to their children's laziness and personal decision to stop going to school. Pathana shared a narrative which involved his son:

> My only son is, nearly 7 years old, in Grade 2 of primary school. I can say that he is very naughty. He does not pay attention while the teacher is teaching in classes. I am worried about his naughtiness. He sleeps in classes if he feels tired. I used to tell his teacher to be patient with his behaviours. At home, he does not listen to me.
>
> Hahaha!…*[interrupted laugh]*… Her son is very naughty (Sonphet).
>
> Now he does not go to school any more. I have tried many ways to encourage him, but he refuses all the time. Sometimes I offer him some money to buy sweets at the school, but he refuses my offer. He said to me, "I don't want to go to school because the teacher teaches difficult writing. I will wait until the teacher will write the easy one. Then I will go to school". I do not understand my child. He always says that the teacher writes very difficult lessons on the board. I do not know whether or not the lessons are very difficult. I think that it is common that the lessons for Grade 2 is harder than Grade 1. When my son was in Grade 1, he was hardly ever absent, and he said that he was happy to study and willing to go to school. Now, he is in Grade 2, he doesn't want to go any more. (Pathana)

Personally, I did not think the boy's laziness was a determinant of his dropping out. There was something in his class that made him uncomfortable. I could think of three possible reasons. The boy's comment, 'the teacher taught difficult writing' shows that the he could not adjust to the new class with more complex content. He may have had low achievement in Grade 1, and when in Grade 2, he could not manage higher level content. It was unclear if the boy had really completed Grade 1 as the school implemented the progressive promotion policy. Another reason could be related to the way the teacher delivered the lesson to the students. The boy may have found that the teaching style was not attractive or stimulating which resulted in him sleeping through classes. There could also be a poor relationship between the teacher and the boy. The transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2 came with a change of a teacher. The Grade 2 teacher's behaviour was certainly different from the Grade 1, and the way the teacher treated each student was also different.

Chanthy talked about her niece who went to school in the beginning of the semester. After she was unwell for a week, she returned to school but was not a regular attender and sometimes went home crying. Finally, she did not go to school any more. When Chanthy asked why she did not want to go to school, her niece simply replied that she did not want to go. Chanthy encouraged her saying, "If you go to school, I will buy you a bicycle. Which colour do you like? Tell me". However, after getting a bicycle, she refused to go to school again. Chanthy agreed to accompany her to school but she refused. She usually cried. If Chanthy held a stick to beat her, she started crying. She was very childish and stupid. She had many friends, but all of them were in school. Chanthy continued:

> Sometimes I speak to her, "Don't you like wearing the school uniform and going to school like your friends do?" She sat quietly. Today, as soon as she knows that you will come to interview me, she runs away to her great-grandmother's home to hide herself. Although she is a niece, I am happy if she likes studying. Her parents in Thailand strongly support her schooling too. Her mother keeps telling me to take her to school and provide her with whatever she wants.
>
> At home, I always speak to her, "Tomorrow you must go to school, and I will take you there". However, she doesn't go. One evening she agreed to go to school, but in the next morning she did not even get out of her bed. When I have pushed her too much, she cries. Some of my cousins recommend that I beat her. However, I have never beaten her. I have only shouted at her.
>
> I used to go with her to school. She sat on a bench in the classroom and kept crying. The teacher told me to leave her there hoping that she would stop crying. I still kept an eye on her from a distance. She was still crying loudly the whole morning. In the rice harvest season, as I wanted to take my niece to school on time, I hired other people to do it. However, when getting to school she did not go into the classroom. (Chanthy)

Chanthy's account has illustrated that the parents and guardians really want their children to go to school and were willing to support their schooling. The reason her niece dropped out of school was not related to family economic capital or other family-related causes. I believe that there was

something in her classroom that made her uncomfortable or feel bad. It was certain that her learning performance lagged behind her peers after her illness, so her teacher may have pushed her to study harder and asked her too many questions in class. If she was unable to answer and the teacher kept asking her, she would feel ashamed and uncomfortable. Furthermore, the teacher may have shouted or behaved aggressively toward her. However, there was no data relating to what exactly went on in the classroom. During my observation, the classroom environment was friendly and relaxed, but this may have occurred only during the time of my observation thus interfering with the real nature of the classroom.

Sonphet certainly wanted his youngest son to go to school. However, he was unable to provide much information about his son who had dropped out of school. He said that it was hard to get his son in school. His son claimed he did not want to go to school because of 'hot weather'. Sonphet sometimes took his son to school, but he did not have the time to do that every day because of his family livelihood. Therefore, his son dropped out of school.

One thing learnt from all six parents was their understanding of the limited opportunities for their children to become employed. The time and expense required for children to complete all their schooling from primary through to higher education to gain eligibility for recruitment, had to be balanced against potentially reduced employment opportunities,[21] therefore, undermining parents' willingness to support their children's schooling. An added frustration for parents was related to the school's practice of collecting money from the students to organise school-based activities. Student behaviours or comments which were attributed to dropping implied classroom or teaching issues.

5.1.4 Discouraging phenomena for parents of both groups

The parents of children both in and out-of-school faced the same discouraging challenges when supporting their children's schooling. Poverty seemed to be a major problem, which is consistent with a study in Southeast Asia by Lee (2016) and a report by UNESCO (2010). For the poor, school fees and other costs related to their children's schooling were a significant factor and became even greater for them if their children went on to higher education. Manivan said that some poor parents were likely to withdraw their children from the school system before the end of their academic year. When a new academic year started, parents were required to pay the school fees which meant that parents, either farmers or government officers, were under financial pressure and stress. Manivan

[21] As most students wanted to be employed by the government, there was a high competition for this opportunity. Thus, parents who possessed greater amounts of economic or social capital are better equipped when seeking opportunities for their children.

alleged that he sometimes felt anxious about money, especially when his salary payment was delayed which left him wanting to withdraw his children from the school system. In addition, as he had so many of his children in primary and secondary schools at the same time, facing up to the total cost of school fees was a particularly worrying. At the time, the primary school fee was 30,000 kip, and the secondary school fee was 70,000 kip per student. Apart from the school fees, there were other expenses during the semesters that parents had to manage.

Economic capital enabled parents to have the capacity to not only support their children to complete general education but also enter the higher education field and then the paid job field. When this capital is lacking, the parents are powerless because both economic and social capital play a vital role in negotiating a place in the field of higher education and employment. The following quotations exemplified the role of economic capital:

> I have a financial hardship. I heard that I need to have much money of around 1 or 2 hundred thousand Baht [Thai currency] to pay someone if I want to enrol my children in tertiary education. Taking an entrance exam is not enough to ensure a place in the field. (Phengta – 151-155)

> This occurrence really discourages me because it seems that only money can pave the way to completion of some level of higher education and employment. It is difficult to be recruited as a government staff without providing under-table money. This action creates social problems because it discourages parents from supporting their children's education. (Manivan – 159-165)

> For example, my expense was about 70 million kip for supporting my son at Teacher Training College. After his graduation, I paid 50,000 Baht to someone to recruit him as a teacher. My question is who receives that money? Is it one of the criteria for being a teacher? (Manivan – 67-70)

Sonphet' expressed his concern for his child's future:

> My child has just completed upper secondary school. If my child wants to continue studying or even to be a soldier, it's the money that concerns me a lot. Presently, to be recruited as government staff, money comes first. If we do not have enough money for our children, there will be no hope to get a paid job. For example, many people graduated from some educational institutions, but they do not have a job now because they did not have money to pay the gatekeeper. (17-23)

This clearly shows that possession of economic capital is essential for parents when mediating an opportunity for their children to achieve educational success.

Pathana also told me about her sister who graduated from Teacher Training College more than three years ago. Her sister wanted to be a teacher, but she did not have sufficient money for a

compensatory payment[22] so she was still unemployed. Because of this, one parent reiterated that it was hard to complete higher education and even harder to find a paid job. Using available funds to mediate the process of gaining a job opportunity was easier for the rich but harder for the poor. These circumstances may further discourage parents and cause some to disregard their children's schooling.

Another deterrent for parents in supporting their children's education relates to kinship. That is, applicants who have a kinship relationship with someone politically powerful enough to influence decision-making in an organisation had more opportunity to be recruited than others. This type of relationship aligns with the definition of social capital. Phengta spoke with frustration:

> I think although my children are in school, there are no jobs available for them because we do not have relatives working in any organisations. Particularly, when I do not have money I feel hopeless with my children's education too. (Phengta–197)

Economic and social capital are seen by parents as determining the schooling achievement of the students in this district. The economic capital is the most influential factor that determines whether students stay in the education system from primary education until employment. Parents possessing more economic capital can find better opportunities for their children to achieve educational success than others. Social capital is also needed to enter tertiary education and recruitment fields. Parents who do not have both economic and social capital have only a glimmer of hope for their children gaining employment.

5.2 Village Two

This village is located off-road about 12 kilometres from the district centre. A red dirt road connects the main road to the village, about 5 kilometres in length, and continues through to several further villages. The road is very dusty in a dry season and slippery in rain. Hundreds of villagers use this road to access the market in the town and to enter wider worlds. Village Two is the first village from the main road. It has three other villages surrounding it; one in the east about 1 kilometre away, and another two villages in the west and north which are about 2 and 4 kilometres away respectively. Village Two is located between two small rivers that stop running a few months after the rainy season. The villagers consume water from wells in the village and in the dry season the villagers are likely to confront food scarcity. This village is considered relatively geographically disadvantaged.

[22] A payment to someone in exchange for a recruitment opportunity.

Village Two consists of 141 families, 564 people in total, and all with the same cultural background. Their houses cluster over a flat land without fences, allowing villagers to travel from house to house easily. Every house is connected to the electricity supply. All families are engaged in subsistence rice farming in the rainy season. During the rice farming season, some families whose farms are far from the village move out to stay on the farm from May until November when the rice harvesting finishes. All their children stay with them during these months[23]. After rice harvesting, some families continue living on the farm raising poultry and cattle. Some cut firewood while some cut sugar cane to earn incomes. Others go to the river, quite a distance away, to catch crabs, snails, or fish for markets or for food. Some families run small businesses selling food, drinks, stationery, toiletries, and biscuits at home. In contrast, those families with children or parents working in Thailand gain better incomes. Villagers who remain sit together during the day and have casual conversations. The income gap between the villagers is not significant although there are distinctions in their economic status.

Apart from the primary school, no other government services such as healthcare, a police station, a post office, or a bank exist. There was also no other government staff, except for the teacher in the village. The villagers live in this village permanently with their farm lands, so there were no in and out-migration trends, other than those who went to work in Thailand.

5.2.1 Headman of village

The headman of village, Outhit, was then 56 years old. From his viewpoint, generally most parents in this village had a positive attitude toward education and expected their children to be employed. Some parents encouraged their children, believing that after completing vocational or tertiary education, they could serve as soldiers, police, or teachers. However, despite the positive attitude, Outhit alluded that many parents did not always advocate education to enable their children to realise their expectations. The parents whose children were not enrolled in school often said, "What is 'going to school' for? I don't see anyone who goes to school being employed" (Outhit). They were not interested in schooling and told their children to go to work at the farm. Outhit suggested that if the parents did not give their children this opportunity, when the children grew up and were in situations where knowledge was needed, they would cry inside.

Five children were not enrolled in that school year. Outhit said that some students were enrolled but did not attend classes regularly. However, the number of students who frequently missed classes

[23] The children were not in school during these months. Primary school closes from May to August for rice growing. The new school year starts on the first day of September, but some children continue staying on the farm with their children until October or November.

had decreased. Some students dropped out in the middle of the academic year but returned to school again in the following year. Outhit wondered whether this circumstance could be attributed to their parents, the students themselves, or the ineffective work of the VEDC. It appears that Outhit blamed others outside the school rather than looking at his own work performance.

Outhit identified three challenges preventing educational improvement in this village. The first challenge was related to family poverty. Most parents prioritised their daily livelihood rather than their children's schooling. Some parents could not support their children properly at the general education level. This factor strongly contributed to demotivating the parents. The second challenge was related to the family traditional lifestyle[24] which had been passed on in families through generations. I viewed this family traditional lifestyle as habitus which was not relevant to schooling. As such, the parents possessing this habitus did not take their children's schooling business seriously. They recognised the importance of education, but they themselves or family members had never achieved educational success. That meant a lack of cultural capital. Outhit stated that the parents mainly let their children make their own decisions. If the children refused to go, the parents largely ignored it. It seems that education was just a small fraction of their family traditional practice. Another challenge relates to the parents' level of literacy. Outhit suggested that most children who do not go to school or drop out of school belong to illiterate parents. Some illiterate parents are not interested in their children's schooling and are unlikely to socialise with most of the villagers. In the morning they go to farm, come home in the evening and go to bed. Although they stay in the village, they live in isolation from the network of connections with the rest of the villagers. They are not interested in schooling, so they would probably not enrol their school-aged children in school or if they did, it would be unlikely to be at the correct age because their lack of knowledge of when their children were born or how old their children were.

From the interview with Outhit, it was discovered that the VEDC played several roles in assisting the school to achieve student enrolment, retention, and academic performance. One role was providing and repairing benches and tables and maintaining the school building. In fact, all parents in the village contributed some money, labour, and essential constructional materials to the school facility maintenance. Another role was encouraging parents to enrol their children in school, informing them

[24] The family traditional lifestyle of the rural villagers refers to their daily routine which was related to their everyday lives. For example, during daytime most parents went to farm, fish, hunt, etc. In the evening, family members sat in front of TV watching dramas or movies. Some, usually fathers, went out to have chats or watch their favourite TV programs with neighbours. Most parents did not usually talk about education or employment, ask their children about their learning issues each day, tell them to review lessons, or inspire them with future employments.

of the value of education, and supporting them as much as possible. The management of visiting parents whose children were not yet enrolled or were frequently absent from school was also part of the VEDC's role. The VEDC held village meetings and discussed the issues of the student enrolment, absenteeism and dropouts. The VEDC then went to meet the students' parents to teach them about government education policy. The parents needed to understand this. Political propaganda was also the VEDC's responsibility.

5.2.2 Parents with children in school

The three parents who had children in school and participated in this study were Somded, Inpeng, and Thongdy. They held positive attitudes toward education and wanted their children to continue schooling up to tertiary education. They recognised the importance of education for their children's futures for survival, even though their children may never be employed.

Somded is father of six children. Two were in primary school; three in secondary school; and one was married. Somded and his wife could not read and write the Lao language. Somded worked as a motorcycle repairman at home. He was a talkative person and enjoyed socialising with neighbours and villagers. Somded wanted his children to complete at least upper secondary school. After that, they could apply to work as police officers, soldiers, or factory workers. He told his children that there were employment opportunities if they completed upper secondary school. Somded was very eager to support his children to go to school and called this schooling mission 'a battle for prestige'. He explained that as he had never been to school, he had no standing in the community and he wanted his children to gain it for him and for the family. At dinner, Somded talked to his children about the benefits of education for daily life:

> 'Now it is a developing era. If you do not go to school now, you will miss an opportunity. When you grow up, you can go to work in cities. If you do not go to school now, you will work hard all your life. The parents are now bad people[25], and we don't want you to be bad like us. We want you to have broad minds, know the way to live life, know the way to go, and gain prestige and respect in society.' One day we went to the city, with our daughter. We missed the bus to come home. 'The bus has gone. No bus to go home' said the mother. 'There another is bus!' said my daughter. I told all my children this experience. If my daughter was not with us that day, we would not have known how to come home because we could not read the bus sign. When my children were young, I told them a lie. When there was a meeting or district staff coming to visit the village, I told them that the police came to arrest someone who did not go to school. Any one

[25] 'Bad people' is a common concept used by the local people to mean illiterate or uneducated people. Some literate people who are not employed also call themselves 'bad people' as they cannot achieve educational success. In fact, they are not truly bad people.

> going to school would be given money or gifts. No one loved children who did not go to school because they could not read and write. (Somded – 56-70)

When the children were at home, Somded used the hazards of manual labour to motivate them to go to school and wanted his children to know how hard it was to work on a farm. His strategy was effective because all his children chose school over the farm. None of them wanted to drop out or even miss a class even though their parents needed their help with housework or farm work.

Somded added that if he did not encourage and accompany his children to school in the first few days, he was unsure if his children would have remained in school. There was a possibility that they would drop out. Even when his children were in secondary school, he sometimes secretly followed them to school to ensure that they, especially the son, did not truant.

Somded valued education. His experience of being illiterate had taught him how much he suffered in situations where literacy was needed, and he did not want this for his children's future. When I first talked with Somded, I did not think that he was illiterate. I observed that the mode of his thinking and the way he behaved regarding his children's education was different from most villagers, and that this indicated a possession of schooling habitus.

Inpeng is father of four children. Two children were in primary school; the other two were in secondary school. Inpeng completed upper secondary school but had no opportunity to go onto higher education. He stayed in the village, worked as a rice farmer in the rainy season and raised domestic animals. Inpeng was very interested in sending his children to school and supporting them. He wanted them to have an opportunity to go onto tertiary education, but he did not expect that his children would be employed by the government. They could attend vocational school, majoring in, for example, cooking, computing, mechanics, or sculpture. After that, they could probably be employed by private organisations, or they could run their own business. Inpeng said his sons could learn mechanics and then open a private car repairing shop if they had enough financial capital. His daughters could study nursing and then work in a clinic if not in a hospital or they could study cloth making and have a private business at home.

Inpeng did not want his children to drop out of school or miss classes to help with housework and farm work. He and his wife decided if they were too busy, they would hire someone to help. If their children were absent, they would not be able to follow the lessons on their return to school, would be ashamed and consequently drop out. If the teachers required their children to help harvest rice, he thought it was acceptable as they were the teacher's students. Inpeng liked socialising with his children, motivating and enriching them with positive attitudes. Before the start of the school year,

Inpeng talked softly to his children at the dinner table. He felt that speaking loudly with authority might frighten the children. He asked each child:

> 'What day and date is tomorrow? Will you go to school tomorrow?' If you do not go to school, go to the farm. If you don't want to work on the farm, go to school. There are many friends there. You will have fun. 'Go to school. Please buy me uniforms and books,' replied all children. I told them, "Ok. I don't have enough money now; wear your old uniforms first. I will buy the new ones later". They are all obedient. No one said that if they do not have new uniforms, they would not go to school. (Inpeng – 124-134)

On the first day of the semester, Inpeng went to the school to register his children. He showed them their classrooms and seats and told them to sit there every day. He said that at first, they did not know their peers and teachers and they were not familiar with the school environment. They almost cried at school. At home, Inpeng found some other children in the neighbourhood to accompany them. Inpeng thought that if he did not encourage them, they would drop out. He was always monitoring their learning performance. In the evening, he asked them, 'What was your mark today?' If they received a good mark, they showed him immediately. If the mark was low, Inpeng pointed out the mistakes, taught and encouraged them to study harder. In the morning, Inpeng woke them up and prepared breakfast for them. If there was not enough food, sometimes the children had to miss breakfast. The children were allowed to watch TV for about two hours in the evening before they went to bed. Inpeng told them that watching TV too much was not good. TV did not always show good things. Some were true; some were fictional.

As Inpeng had completed upper secondary school, he knew the school system well and how to interact with the teachers and encourage his children. He possessed cultural capital for positioning himself to help his children in the schooling field and the habitus that was acquired through the education system when he was a student. These resources enabled him to be involved effectively in his children's learning process and to maintain on good terms with his children.

Thongdy is a grandfather who looks after a granddaughter while her parents work in Thailand. His granddaughter was in Grade 2 of primary school. Thongdy completed Grade 2 of primary school but said he had forgotten all he had learnt. Thongdy's house is in a rice farm about 500 meters from the main village. His house was not connected to electricity. Thongdy did not offer much about his thoughts and attitudes in supporting his granddaughter's schooling. He stated that he did not have any expectations from his granddaughter's schooling. He let his granddaughter make decisions about school and allowed it to happen. He looked after her and told her to pay attention by studying and listening to teachers when they were explaining the lesson in class. He taught her to be disciplined, well behaved, and to go to school every day.

Thongdy continued the narrative that it was usually her parents, especially her father, who encouraged her to pay attention to study and bought her a bicycle. The granddaughter had strong self-awareness. In the morning, she wanted to leave home to go to school early. Thongdy told her, 'Have breakfast first. You'll have a stomach-ache.' 'No, I'll be late,' she replied. If the granddaughter needed notebooks, she asked for some money from her grandfather and went to buy them for herself. At home, she usually did homework and studied alone in the evening. She sometimes asked her grandfather for help, but he could not. Thongdy said she could read and write Lao language well.

It is difficult to imagine the factors influencing this girl's interest in schooling. She lived on the farm with grandparents, but she really wanted to go to school and performed well. Her grandparents did not encourage her much and she knew little about the school system. Her parents in Thailand sometimes rang her to make sure she was going to school.

Somded and Inpeng's views of their children's schooling were different in terms of their possession of cultural capital but the same in terms of habitus. This suggests that the parental education and qualifications are not always a determinant of schooling success. The case of Thongdy's granddaughter also demonstrates that the people with whom the student lives do not determine her interest in schooling and learning performance or that a student can perform well even when they need to live with another family member while their parents work away from home.

The three parents could not identify challenges in supporting their children's schooling. Economic capital was likely to be problematic, but they confirmed that it was not, because they could provide all that was reasonably required for their children at the general education level. Somded said that there was not really a problem because his children were obedient. They never requested their parents to buy them items such as a motorbike. It was the parents who wanted to buy it for them. Inpeng confirmed that his family finances were not so problematic. This was because he could earn incomes from selling some rice and raising poultry, goats, pigs, and cows.

5.2.3 Parents whose children's school attendance is classified as' out-of-school'

The three parents, whose children had dropped out of school, met with me in the focus group discussion, also recognised that education was very important for their children's future. They wanted their children to go to school. However, the form of involvement of these parents was different from that of the parents whose children were in school. These three parents did encourage their children to go to school but did not take it seriously. Most of the time, they let their children

make their own decisions about attendance. The three parents whose children were not in school were Choy, Samly, and Mesa.

Choy is a mother unable to read and write the Lao language although her husband could read and write some Lao words. They had three children who never went to school, and they were already over the school age of seven years. Choy still wanted her children to go to school, but she deferred to her children's personal decisions. In fact, it was not parental intent to ignore the responsibility of placing their children in school; it was their habitus which was not consistent with schooling that guided their action.

Samly is mother of three children – two were in secondary school and an eight-year-old son who dropped out of Grade 1 of primary school a year ago. Samly expected her children to complete upper secondary school, and she told her son to go to school by himself. He went initially with his older brother[26], but after a few days he did not want to go again. Although the teachers and the village headman visited his parents several times, and offered him everything he wanted, nothing changed. In contrast, his older sister did not want to be absent, even on the day of an uncle's funeral. Samly's daughter stayed with her grandmother, but the two younger boys who did not go to school stayed on the farm with the parents. If the son decided to return to school, he also would have had to stay in the village with his grandmother.

Samly asserted that her son dropped out of school because he was over-school-aged and ashamed to be in the same class with the younger students. This boy was also scared or unconfident in meeting new people. His problem in socialising shown by difficulty in making friends with peers, may have emerged because he grew up in the farm isolated from the village culture. Drawing on a Bourdieusian concept, he lacked the village habitus that was important for enhancing his confidence in interacting with peers at school. The school environment might have become an alien place for him, which is consistent with the concept of a 'fish out of water' (Dumenden & English, 2013). The boy probably felt excluded or unaccepted at school. Growing up on the farm, he had acquired the habitus and cultural capital relating to farming that were not compatible with the school setting. Thus, the boy found it difficult to get along with his peers at school who possessed different kinds of capital.

[26] As their schools were on the same road, they left home together. The older brother dropped his younger brother at the primary school and went on to his secondary school.

Mesa is mother of nine children. Seven were in primary and secondary school but the two youngest children were not of school age. One son had dropped out of Grade 1 of primary school. Mesa did not remember his birthday so did not know how old he was. This is because Mesa could not read and write the Lao language and had no record of her children's birthdays. Mesa coaxed him every day, 'Please go to school. If you go, I'll pray to you', but he did not. His friends also persuaded him to go to school and Mesa bought him a bicycle, uniforms, and stationery for him, but he still did not go. The boy said that he would go if his mother accompanied and stayed with him at school. This was all that he needed from his mother. He did not need pocket money or want for other things. Mesa stated that at the beginning of the semester, the boy went to school for some days, but his peers beat him. He often came home crying. After that, he did not want to go to school any more unless his mother accompanied him. However, Mesa could not do like that because, she said, she was so busy. In this case, the problem included bullying[27] at the school and the parents being ignorant of the issue. If the parents had reported the bullying issue to the teachers and continued to monitor the child's behaviour, this boy may not have dropped out. The large number of children in the family may have also contributed to the challenge of children's schooling because the parents had to work long hours to ensure sufficient food and financial resources for all family members. His older sister had very keen interest in schooling. If her motorbike was broken, she cried because she was worried she would miss her classes.

Traditionally rural children in this district went to school at the age of 8. I, myself started schooling at this age, but many of my classmates in primary and lower secondary schools were even older than me. In this area, it was only recently that children aged six were required to be in school. It could be possible that parents who stayed on their farms were unaware of the new policy regarding the school enrolment age. Age is generally not important nor remembered in daily life; parents do not celebrate their own nor their children's birthdays and birth dates are never recorded. Even if they had wanted to do so, they could not write it because they were illiterate.

5.3 Village Three

This village is located off-road about 15 kilometres from the district centre. There is a dirt road of about 6 kilometres from the main road to the village. It is dusty in the dry season and muddy in the rainy period. Village Three consists of 157 families and a total of 756 people with the same ethnicity, language, religion, and tradition. Every household is connected to electricity and has access to a

[27] Traditionally in this rural area, bullying was not noticeable. There were certainly some cases where children hurt each other in the play and cried. In this document I used the term 'bullying' but do not think it was really bullying.

well for water. Houses are close to one another and many fruit trees grow in the village, supplying villagers with seasonal fruit and plenty of shade. Village Three is located on fertile wet land suitable for agriculture. In the west of the village, there is a substantial river abundant with fish and other water animals hunted by the villagers for food and income. The villagers also derive benefit from this river by growing vegetables on both of its banks. There are only two nearby villages; one is about 700 metres to the north, and the other is a small village with about 70 families, about 2 kilometres to the south. Other than the primary and secondary schools, there are no other government services such as a healthcare centre in Village Three.

Village Three is better developed economically in comparison to its neighbours and with Village Two. Most families in this village have good housing, and some families are able to afford expensive cars and farming machinery. The main source of their income is from agriculture. Some families have their own sugar cane plantations; some have fish ponds; and many families raise pigs and poultry. Some families earn income from making noodles and running small shops from home selling miscellaneous goods such as beer, cigarettes, sweets, cooking ingredients, toiletries, and stationery. Many families also add to their income through their children working in Thailand[28]. However, there were some families who were considered poor because they owned only a small portion of agricultural land and did not have sufficient rice for the whole year's consumption. All parents are farmers in the rainy season and gardeners after the rice harvesting season. Their daily routine was to leave early for the farm to water vegetable gardens, work the whole day, and return in the evening. After dinner, some went out to socialise with neighbours, while most sat in front of TV with family members.

From my interaction with the village environment plus my prior experience of the area, children in this village have learnt to be gardeners and marketers, and to become self-sufficient from the time they were young. For example, the parents involved their children in growing vegetables and selling their crops by taking them to the gardens and the market in the town. This specific knowledge and skills has been passed on to the children through their participation in these activities and is cultural capital that the children have acquired daily from home. The children were relatively independent and generally made their own decisions provided their behaviours were acceptable to the social norms and the state laws. Hence, the decision to go to school or drop out was often made by the children. Even though the parents wanted their children to be in school, they themselves had limited

[28] Children who went to work in Thailand were not only from poor families but also from families with subsistence income. They considered Thailand as their workplace where they could earn a better income than in Lao PDR.

cultural capital about schooling and employment, to motivate their children. I viewed this mode of parenting as family habitus acquired naturally and unconsciously in their family and society.

From my prior experience in this region, I was sure that the young people wanted to escape from the cycle of rurality and poverty and to experience urban lifestyles. No-one liked working under the hot sun, in the rain, and in the muddy environments. The rural villagers always thought that they were of inferior status to those in cities and believed that urban people had happier and wealthier lives. Therefore, everyone wanted to live and work in offices, in cities rather than rural areas. However, education could not help them gain that opportunity, and they knew that only those who had social and economic capital could achieve the success.

5.3.1 Headman of village

The headman of village was Ken. He said that all parents had positive attitudes toward education and valued their children's schooling. They supported their children to attend school and wanted them to have well paid, good jobs with good positions. The term 'good jobs' referred to working in an air-conditioned office with good incomes. The 'good position' was preferred by most of the government staff because their incomes were superior, and they had more decision-making power; they also received greater respect from colleagues and society. Ken estimated around 90 percent of the parents in the village co-operated well with each other and the VEDC in supporting school policy. For example, if the school informed parents about their children's absences, they would bring their children to school and keep in contact with the teachers so that they were aware of their children's behaviours.

Ken observed that some students dropped out of school because of their low level of learning performance and their irregular class attendance. Underperformance often resulted in the grade repetition followed by student dropout. Ken's perception was that the students' poor performances were associated with the teachers' teaching performances. He was sceptical about the teachers' subject matter and instructional knowledge. His view was, "… not a criticism of the teachers, but I wonder if the teachers have sufficient knowledge to enable their students to learn effectively". Ken gave an example of what he saw when he was a chairman of the final examination of the Grade 5 students a year before:

> Students spent nearly an hour to do a mathematical quiz. A question: 'the distance from Aunt Dee's home to the market is 1.5 km. How many kilometres does Aunt Dee walk each day to market and back home? And how many kilometres does Aunt Dee walk each week to market and back home?' When the exam time was nearly over, I observed that the students could not do the quiz. Therefore, I explained them how to answer those questions. I am still doubtful if it was the

> students' limitation of mathematical skills is a consequence of the teachers' knowledge or the lesson contents. It is just an easy quiz, but the students could not do it. (Ken – 56-64)

Ken noted that some students just sat still and when the time was over, they submitted a blank paper. However, most students were promoted to the next grade because of a concession policy. This unwritten policy was applied by the school to help students to continue, decrease the repetition rate and the risk of student dropouts, while increasing the retention rate at the same time. With this continuous promotion policy, many students had poor learning performances and completed primary school with low literacy and numeracy levels. Teachers needed only good statistics showing student retention met the school targets satisfying the DESB's goals rather than focussing on student learning.

Ken believed poor student performance was not the only a root cause of the school dropout rates. Some students dropped out purposely even though their learning performances were at a high level. Their decision to leave school was influenced by placing value on working in Thailand because many youths from the region travelled there seeking employment. This phenomenon drew the students' attention away from schooling. Ken acknowledged that the VEDC could not keep them at school as the decision to leave school was made by the family and was related to the family financial circumstances. Ken was aware that some families lived from hand to mouth, and the parents could not even afford to buy their children stationery. Therefore, some students dropped out of school for financial reasons although they had performed well academically. Conclusively, economic capital was one of the underlying causes of the school dropout in this village.

- **The VEDC's roles in improving student ERA**

Analysis of the interview showed the VEDC's four responsibilities in educational improvement in this village. One was to ensure that tables and benches in the school were sufficient in number for the students and were in good condition otherwise the VEDC and all parents were required to construct new furniture or repair the unusable ones. Another responsibility was to organise a village meeting, 10 to 15 days before the start of the school year, to encourage all parents to enrol their children in school. This practice was a measure put in place to achieve the yearly school enrolment rate target as well as the VEDC's goal of having all school-aged children in school.

The third responsibility was related to reducing the dropout rate. The VEDC had a strategy to prevent students from dropping out of school. Every student and parent had to sign a pledge promising that students would not leave the school during the school year. If any broke the pledge, their parents had to pay a fine of 500,000 Kip to the VEDC. While both parents and the school agreed to this

contract, in practice it was not enforced, and no parents were ever required to pay a fine for their children's dropout of school. The VEDC's final responsibility was to foster the value of education. The VEDC had a message for parents:

> 'It is certain that the final goal of going to school is employment and better well-being. Education is also important for our daily life. For example, when our children are in unfamiliar places in cities and do not know the way to go, they have to read road signs telling the direction. If they ask someone, but s/he does not know, shows a wrong direction or tells a lie, what will happen to our children? Thus, having education will help our children survive in difficult circumstances.' I always tell the parents about the importance of having reading and writing skills for a daily life although in the future their children may not be able to get paid jobs as intended. (Ken – 116-123)

This demonstrated that the VEDC recognised the importance of education in daily life and attempted to enthuse parents with the value of schooling for their children. It was expected that the VEDC's advocacy might help the school increase the enrolment and retention rate and achieve the DESB's goals. However, there were two major issues that Ken spoke about during the interview. One concerned family finances and school-aged children having pocket money. For most children, if they did not have some pocket money, they did not want to go to school. Ken gave an example of his two grand-children. They needed 2000 Kip in the morning and another 2000 kip in the afternoon. They did not want to go to school if they were not given the money. There was some criticism from parents about teachers selling sweets at school. The pocket money created extra costs on schooling for the parents. The poor suffered most in relation to the direct and indirect schooling costs.

Another issue was related to a limited opportunity for employment. Ken stated:

> In fact, the parents want their children to have paid jobs, but as we can see in our society nowadays, after graduating from tertiary schools, finding jobs is very difficult. To be recruited as a government worker such as a nurse or soldier requires 40 to 50 thousand Thai Baht. (81-83)

Therefore, many parents did not readily support their children to continue further in schooling as the parents knew that their children would have limited opportunities to be recruited. Ken added:

> many parents do not strongly support their children to further their study as the parents know that their children will not be employed when they graduate. The parents do not even have any hope for their children's schooling future, and they often say that their children will not be able to have good jobs or to hold good positions as there are no vacant job positions for them. This is what I have heard from the parents. In my opinion, it may be true. (86-90)

This view has a negative impact on parents deciding whether to invest in their children's schooling. Even though their children were in primary school, parents questioned the value of education if their children would be unable to gain employment as a final outcome of schooling.

The most disappointing incident in this district occurred when students who were listed to win government scholarships were replaced by other student names. Ken continued:

> in this district after students completed upper secondary school, those who had high scores were listed for receiving the government scholarships to go to tertiary education. Unfortunately, on the departure day, some names on the list had been replaced with other names without any reason. This replacement certainly shocked the particular parents and students. This phenomenon thus has become a discouraging example for other parents in the district. (91-95)

This quotation demonstrated that good academic performance was not sufficient to win the government scholarships and did not always enable students to achieve educational success in this district. Parents who were wealthy and able to establish social networks with the scholarship allocators, negotiated with them to be given scholarships for their children. Certainly, events such as these undermine parental trust in the school system of the district.

5.3.2 Parents with children in school

The three parents who had their children in primary school included Somsy, Ekalad, and Bounmy. They met with me for a focus group discussion but the data from each of them has been presented separately. Two of the parents expected their children to gain employment with the government, while one did not expect much. Somsy is a young mother who dropped out of Grade 4 of primary school because her rice farm was flooded, and her family lacked rice. Therefore, her parents needed more labourers in the rice fields. She said she really wanted to go to school, but she had to drop out because every time she went to school, her father became very angry at her.

Somsy had four children – one was in kindergarten and the others were in primary school and were performing well. She expected her children to continue studying to higher education level, and then be employed by the government or private organisations. She kept telling them to persist with study. One of her children was enrolled later than his age because he had stunted growth. Somsy's children liked going to school; they did not want to drop out or even miss classes.

After the evening meal, Somsy told her children to study and do homework. Then they were allowed to watch TV for a short time before bed. They were obedient. Somsy kept them in this evening routine but often needed to always remind of it. Somsy encouraged her children:

> if you want to be government staff member and work in a good environment, you have to study hard. I refer to myself for I did not have an opportunity to go to school, and now I am poor. If you want to gain respect and honour from others, you only have to go to school. My little child said to me, "I want to have as high a qualification as possible". "Ok, I will support you if you love studying," I replied. (Somsy – 43-48)

> I sometimes refer to a person having higher education and being respected by many villagers. If you want to be like that person, you must pay close attention to study. If you like studying and have a high learning performance, I will support you until higher education. In contrast, if you are too lazy to study, I will not support you any more. If you have low learning performance, to get a paid job, much money is required to bribe someone. This is impossible because we do not have money to do so. (Somsy – 82-88)

In the family, Somsy placed great value on her children's schooling. She strongly encouraged, supported, and expected her children to achieve educational success. This value can be viewed as family habitus which had a positive impact on the children's learning performance. There was also a close relationship among family members and good supervision by the mother.

Ekalad completed lower secondary school. He had three daughters – one in Grade 2 of primary school and two in lower secondary school. Ekalad strongly supported his children and expected them to be employed by the government. All his children were also eager to go to school and did not want to drop out. What worried him, he said, was his wife's attitude. His wife sometimes became angry at the children and told them to drop out of school. Ekalad always encouraged his children to study because education was very important for their future:

> As they are women, if they marry a bad man, without a husband, they will be able to live on their own. With education, they will have broad thinking. I do not want them to be like me rejected my educational opportunity. I speak from my experience. (Ekalad – 32-36)

Ekalad observed that his children engaged in many things at the same time at home such as watching TV, studying, and playing with friends. Sometimes while they were reviewing their lessons, their mother might interrupt them and tell them to feed the ducks or chickens. The interruption could spoil their concentration on the lessons.

Bounmy, another father, completed lower secondary school. He had one daughter in Grade 2 of primary school. Bounmy was not yet to have any expectations on his daughter's education as she was still young. He only hoped his daughter might complete some levels of higher education. He was unaware of what his daughter wanted to achieve in terms of her schooling.

Bounmy always encouraged his daughter to pay attention to her schooling. However, he said that his wife was often angry with her and told her to help with housework. His wife did not know how to motivate her daughter to study apart from telling her, "if you do not want to be a farmer like me, you have to study and be good at studying. If you want to be employed and gain a good income, you have to pay attention to study". Bounmy sometimes encouraged his daughter by contrasting

the life of people who were employed with that of the unemployed to show his daughter the difference as a direct consequence of having an education.

Factors that undermined the three parents' intentions to support their children's schooling included the advantages of going to work in Thailand where most families competitively earned incomes. The parents whose children worked in Thailand had good financial means for daily expenses, buying motorbikes and agricultural machinery, and building new houses. There was a difference in family financial status between families with children in Thailand and those with children in school. This sometimes had a negative effect on the parents who sent their children to school (Somsy & Bounmy). The financial contributions to school maintenance fees also discouraged parents. Somsy felt drained when she was required to contribute more money, however, she kept encouraging her children to study in the hope that her investment in the children's education today would benefit her children in the future.

A final negative factor was related to employment opportunity. After graduating from a vocational school, job applicants had to wait for announcement of quotas to join the government workforce. However, each year the number of allocations was fewer than that of applicants. Bounmy said that prior to be recruited as a teacher, a probationary teacher had to work many years without payment or any incentives. Bounmy and Somsy said that if the family did not have sufficient money, there was no opportunity for their children to access higher education and employment fields. Job applicants had to pay compensatory money to someone who helped through the process. For example, to be a policeman, an applicant was required to pay about 200,000 Baht to the recruiter. Somsy claimed that it was impossible for her to find even 100,000 Baht.

Somsy claimed that lack of family finances was a main issue in supporting her children's schooling. It will become particularly problematic at secondary school level where school maintenance fees and other schooling costs will certainly increase. For example, the parents of secondary school students were required to contribute 5,000 kip monthly for school facility maintenance.

5.3.3 Parents whose children's school attendance is classified as 'out-of-school'

The parents who met with me in the focus group discussion were Nilad, Anulak, and Bounta. Each had children who were not attending school. Nilad is a mother who had completed primary school. She had two children. The oldest child was married and worked in Thailand. The youngest child recently dropped out of Grade 4 of primary school and still lived with his parents. Nilad strongly encouraged her son and sold many domestic animals to support his schooling. She never refused to

give him money whenever he asked for it before going to school. Unfortunately, her son did not want to continue.

Nilad and her husband wanted their son to be employed by the government in the future. Even though they could not help him with school work, they could help him financially. Some of his aunts also encouraged him to keep on with schooling. However, Nilad complained that, her son's laziness at schooling caused him to eventually drop out without reason other than that he did not want to study.

Anulak is a grandfather who had never been to school. His grandson had recently dropped out of Grade 4. Anulak's grandson and Nilad's son were close friends. They were in the same age and grade and dropped out together. Anulak also wanted his grandson to attend school, but he did not do much to encourage him, other than telling him, 'If you go to school, you will be literate, and it will be with you forever'. The boy's parents, who were in Thailand, told him to go to school and scolded him for his ignorance. The boy's parents said that they had worked hard and saved money to support their son's schooling. However, their son ignored their pleas. Bounta, whose child dropped out of Grade 3, did not provide information about her educational background. She left the focus group discussion early because her young child cried and persuaded her to go home.

Although their children were not in school, the three parents wanted them to return to school. They encouraged and were ready to support them with learning materials, uniforms, and other items that they requested within reason. The two boys dropped out of school as they were four years older than their class cohort. Anulak and Nilad suggested that as their children were older than their classmates,

> they might feel ashamed to study in the same class with other students who are younger than them. In addition, other students who are much younger than them are studying at higher grades, lower secondary school. (63-65)

No other reasons were given by the boys apart from not wanting to study.

Another factor which may have had a strong influence on the boys dropping out of school was they were old enough to engage in manual work and wanted to go to work in Thailand. According to Nilad, the villagers competed to accumulate money, a ritual implanted in the minds of upcoming generations by family members. Therefore, when children were old enough, they had a strong desire for money as they observed that any one going to work in Thailand could have wealth and a modern lifestyle. Nilad's son also wanted to go to Thailand, but she did not allow him to. Two parents stated:

> Children are nowadays enthusiastic to make money for their personal use. As their parents cannot satisfy their needs, they seek those needs by themselves. The only way is going to work in Thailand. Some children make money not only for their personal use, but also for supporting their parents back home. (Bounta & Nilad – 101-105)

Anulak's grandson and Nilad's son dropped out of school because they enjoyed socialising with other boys who did not go to school. As they were able to enter a wider social world via their mobile phones, they could easily be distracted from schooling. Bounta presumed that the boys could fall in love in which case, the boys would feel ashamed to be in a lower grade with poor learning performances than their age group.

5.4 Summary

The three villages have geographical distinctions which can create differences in villagers' family incomes and accessibility to cultural resources. Village One is considered to be in a more advantageous location than Village Two and Three in terms of educational and occupational opportunities. The students do not travel far to primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school. They can also access some employment opportunities in the town and the city. The children in Village One are better positioned in the schooling field to acquire habitus and cultural capital which can enable them to be comfortable and confident at school. The parents in Villages One and Three seem to possess better economic capital and educational attainment than those in Village Two. However, the range of incomes for parents in Village One is broader than for parents in Villages Two and Three. The students in Villages Two and Three are in the similar position in the schooling field, but the Village Three students are in a relatively better economic environment.

All parents, regardless of different socio-economic backgrounds, in the three villages have positive attitudes toward education. They all want their children to be in school and then employed, which is a main goal of their investment in schooling. Parents who are employed as government staff and business people with good incomes are deeply involved in their children's school work at home and can support their children well financially. While, these parents do not encounter academic problems in relation to their children's schooling, they are not happy with the additional financial contributions expected for school activities and presentation of gifts to teachers on important days. Most parents have limited involvement in the process of their students' learning and totally depend on teachers being responsible for their children's learning as they themselves lack knowledge about schooling. In all three villages, a loose cooperation between the VEDCs and the schools exists for education improvement.

The data from the three villages suggests that parents' educational background does not always determine student retention. Some literate parents have children who drop out of school, while some illiterate ones have their children in school. What seems to provide the difference in retaining students at school is socialisation and frequent conversations at home between parents and their children. Dufur et al. (2013) see that social capital derived from home is more important than that from school. That is, parental involvement impacts positively on students' learning success, similar to the meta-synthesis conducted by Wilder (2014). Parents are important advocates who build their children's positive attitudes towards education. It is interesting to note that where and with whom the children live does not guarantee the children's interest in schooling and learning performance. Some students living with grandparents outperform those who stay with their own parents.

The parents whose children dropped out of school in this study really wanted their children to go to school. They were ready to invest in their children's schooling. However, there were some challenges that caused the students to drop out. In Village One the students left after illness or absence for many days. When they returned to school, they found that the school no longer appealed to them and they withdrew. Causes of student dropout included being over-school age, bullying, poor performance and grade repetition, staying on farms, and family poverty.

Generally, it was poverty which was the major barrier to school attendance within the three villages, especially for those parents who had many children in school. School fees and other schooling-related costs were financial burdens for most families. Because of family poverty, some children were required to earn an income and to help with household work as reported by Lee (2016) in reference to educational problems in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, it was very hard for the students to gain opportunities to access higher education and even harder to enter employment fields. It was widely acknowledged that employment opportunities were often gained through the payment of financial compensation or kinship relationships with people in power. Rural parents consider that 'employment' is a means of disrupting the cycle of poverty.

Parental habitus is vital for children's schooling success. Parents who have positive attitudes toward education and are willing to support their children, possess 'transformative habitus' (Mills, 2008). That is, they want their children to transform their current status quo into a better future. In the process of transformation, economic capital plays a key role in facilitating the transition from primary education to higher education and then to employment. Social capital is also necessary for entering tertiary education and recruitment fields. Economic and social capital play a vital role in negotiating a place in the field of higher education and employment. Parents who do not possess economic and

social capital have little, or no hope for their children's employment. The next chapter presents the analysis of the data collected from principals and teachers in the three primary schools.

Chapter 6
THREE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

This chapter presents research data collected across three primary schools in a rural district of Lao PDR. The data was gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. Throughout this chapter, the schools are referred to as School One, School Two, and School Three. The chapter begins with key data related to School One and includes some theorisation interspersed throughout the chapter. The data collected from each school are presented under four sub-headings:

- School leadership and management
- Teachers' views on parents and students
- Challenges to school internal efficiency
- Enhancement of school internal efficiency.

6.1 School One

School One was located in the middle of Village One. The school had a large playground with many trees in front of the school building providing comfort for the teachers and students on hot days. The school building was in a good condition with five classrooms and a teacher office. Each classroom had sufficient tables and benches for the students. On the walls inside each room there were a variety of pictures and posters–a world map, a Lao map, flags of Asian countries, a Lao alphabet sheet, a class organisational chart, drawings, proverbs, school rules, anti-drug information, sanitation information, and parents' phone numbers. At the back of each classroom, there was a table; on which there were three boxes containing teaching aids for the subjects of Mathematics, Lao language, and World Around Us.

The school had a small library in which the teachers took their students to read books. There were separate toilets for teachers and students and a bathroom. Water was collected from the well. The school was connected to electricity, but there were no fans in classrooms. During summer, all windows were opened to allow wind through the classrooms to reduce internal heat. In the teachers' office, there were shelves and cupboards for storing official documents and a water cooler. There was no computer, so all documents created by the school were handwritten.

In this school, there were six female staff–the principal, four teachers, and a probationary teacher. They had been teaching for at least 15 years and at most 32 years, excluding the probationary teacher. Four of the teachers and the probationary teacher held diplomas (completion of lower

secondary school and a three-year-teaching-training program), and one teacher held an advanced diploma (completion of upper secondary school and three-year-teaching-training program). The teacher with the highest qualification was the school principal. Only one teacher was born in this village and she had been at this school for 30 years. Others had moved from different schools in different villages and had worked at this school for at least 10 years. The age of the teachers ranged from 41 to 53 years.

As of the school year 2015-16, the total number of the students in Grades 1–5, enrolled at this school was 147 with 70 being girls. The youngest students were four years old and the oldest student was 12 years old which indicated that there were both under and overage students in this school. There was a significant difference in the number of students in each grade level. For example, Grade 5 had the most with 35 students while Grade 2 had the lowest number with 23 students.

The DESB report revealed that in the previous school year 2014-15, there were 134 students in the school including 66 girls. Two students–a boy and a girl–had dropped out in the middle of the school year but no reasons were identified. At the end of the school year, three girls did not participate in the final examination, again with no reasons given. The results of this examination determined whether students could be promoted to the next grade. In this school year, two boy students failed the examinations and repeated the same grade. Nonetheless, the school principal stated that the school performance for the last three or five years had improved. The school had all school-aged children attending, and the absence and dropout rates were gradually decreasing. The repetition rate was not high, accounting for less than one percent, and the Grade 5 completion rate was at 100 percent. There was inconsistency between the data from the DESB report and that given by the school principal in the interview. From a personal view, the researcher felt data from the DESB report was more reliable than that from the interview with the principal because the DESB report was based on the school report.

The dominant teaching method is called 'five-pointed star'[29] and has been introduced by the Ministry of Education and Sports. This method is student-centred, not teacher-centred. The five points of the star cover teaching methodologies involving class activities, posing questions, working in groups, adapting lesson content to suit students' backgrounds, and using teaching aids. With this pedagogy, teachers use effective questioning techniques to encourage the students to find answers by

[29] This title is named in Lao language and is a direct translation.

themselves. At the end of the class, the teachers evaluate how much the students have learnt and understood from the lesson taught.

In the principal's opinion, 'good teaching' meant that teachers paid attention to developing teaching plans and producing teaching aids. The teachers paid close attention to poorly performing students and created activities suitable for the students at three different levels. The lesson contents were related to their daily experiences. For example, when students were asked to imagine a market, the teachers suggested they think about the market in the district, not in the province. The teachers had activities for the students and visual aids to help them understand and to stimulate their thinking. The district pedagogical advisor collaborated with the principal to improve teaching performance. In the district, this school was expected to be a model school (Vatsana–162-173).

The school principal and the teachers agreed that the five-pointed star was a good teaching method. It involved all students in group activities, and students had an opportunity to ask, answer, touch, and do (Vanpheng–278). This method required many teaching aids and questions to stimulate students' thinking. Using teaching aids that were relevant to their daily lives helped the students see, touch, and think. When learning about animals, for example, the teachers showed them pictures of the animals, so they could understand and remember clearly (Thida and Thamma–283).

6.1.1 School leadership and management

Research findings have consistently demonstrated that the quality of leadership and management makes a significant change to school and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Day, 2008). This suggests that schools need to have effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their students. The principal in this school is both a leader and manager. The school leadership and management in this study are categorised into the five themes of establishing school goals, setting expectations, supporting teacher growth and development, developing internal relations, and building external relationships. Each of these themes are discussed in the following sections.

The process of establishing the school goals is usually at the heart of educational management. School goals are strongly influenced by pressures particularly from government mandates, and expressed through formal policy statements (Bush, 2007). This school complied with and implemented the national policy rather than introducing school goals to respond to their students' needs. Specifically, the school worked towards targets which would achieve the goals set by the DESB and implemented a DESB developed plan. The principal articulated:

> Upper levels of the education system make a plan and we implement the plan at our school. The plan has set the expected rate of net enrolment. This school has already achieved 100 percent of net enrolment. Every school age child in the village is enrolled. (Vatsana–6-10)

It appears that the term 'school goal' was an unfamiliar concept to teachers in this school. When I asked them about their school goal, they were silent for a while, and then one teacher started to utter, "Hmmm! Don't know what to say. Difficult to say" (Sopha–292). After that, another teacher recalled, "To have everyone be able to read and write and to retain every student in school" (Thida–293). "All children between 6 and 10 years old should be in primary school" (Sopha–294). However, the school principal suggested the school was aiming to have all 5-10-year-old children in school with those who were aged five enrolled in pre-primary school. The school also expected that all children would be able to read and write basic Lao language by the time they completed primary schooling.

Internal harmony was well maintained in this school. There were good relationships among the teachers, between the students and the teachers, and among the students. There was no discrimination, bullying, scolding or shouting (Sopha–260). The students were taught to love and help each other and share food and drinks (Vanpheng and Sopha–150). Everyone was the same and equally treated (Thida–151). Sopha said she loved the grade 1 students and treated them as if they were her own children. Her students who had personal hygiene problems were given baths and a change of clothes. The teachers often brought food, drinks and snacks to the school to share with their colleagues as breakfast or lunch. One teacher described their relationship:

> In our school, we love each other like our family members. We help each other. We share food and drink. If I have some, I share it with others. If others have, they share with me. It is different from other schools in the district. We are all friendly. (Sopha–322)

The school worked externally with the VEDC and all parents in the village. The school principal and the VEDC had discussions about what was to be developed at the school and the school fee each student would be charged. The VEDC also mobilised funds from the parents in the village for the school improvement. When a new school gate was required for example, each family contributed about 10,000 Kip. In the following year, a new fence was construction with a combination of school funds and the parent contribution. The VEDC also financially supported the probationary teacher who worked without earning a salary. Importantly, the VEDC encouraged parents to send their school-aged children to school and visited parents whose children had dropped out. The school contacted parents whose school-age children were frequently absent. Initially the teachers telephoned the parents and the situation did not improve, the teachers went to visit them to discuss their irregular attendance and to encourage them to support their children's schooling. In addition,

the parents helped the school with building seats in front of the school under the shade of the trees and constructed a parking lot for the teachers and the students. Furthermore, the parents were invited to watch the dancing and singing performances and sporting events in which their children were involved (Vatsana–243-245).

However, the relationships between the school, the parents and the VEDC were still weak. The VEDC only helped the school when the school requested it. For most of the time, the VEDC was unaware of what went on in school including the standards of teaching and learning performance. The parents and teachers had little contact if the children went to school regularly and neither were they informed about school matters or work. It was felt that there was a wide gap in the relationship between the school and its community as school information was seldom communicated to the VEDC and parents. To minimise this gap and support the school improvement, relationships need to be established and strengthened between teachers, VEDC, and parents so that their social capital accumulates.

The principal supported teachers' professional growth and development. According to the principal, class observations and the feedback given were contemporary methods to improve teaching quality. The principal commented on her responsibility in observing the class and giving feedback:

> I observe the teachers´classes and give them feedback. In this month I will observe two classes–Grade 1 and 3–because I am busy with administrative work as well. This is not to criticise their teaching but to help them improve their teaching. (Vatsana–210)

The principal conducted observations in each teacher's class twice a year. The second occasion was to ensure that the principal's feedback from the first inspection had been acted upon. The teacher who was judged to have performed best demonstrated her teaching methodology to all her colleagues. In this way, the teachers at this school worked to improve teaching quality.

Focus group discussion data showed that the teachers in this school monitored each other's class every month. This practice created a culture of sharing which provided an opportunity for them to learn and improve the quality of their own teaching. In addition, the DESB's pedagogical advisor came to inspect, provided feedback and developed one teaching plan as a model. The teachers also had an opportunity to exchange teaching experiences with teachers in the neighbouring schools. They observed their classes and exchanged teaching plans with them (Vanpheng, Sopha, and Thida). The teaching plan that was agreed to be the best was accepted as the model.

Participating in these social networks allowed the teachers in this school to accumulate the social and cultural capital necessary for their teaching improvement. Discussions and interactions between the teachers in this school and other schools created a social network of connections which

generated social capital among them. The teachers participating in this network gained new knowledge and skills useful for their teaching improvement.

6.1.2 Teachers' views on parents and students

Generally, the teachers held pessimistic views of their students' parents. Past experience had shown them that some parents did not encourage and support their children in their schooling while others wanted their children to stay with their younger siblings during the rice harvesting season (Vatsana–63). There were some poor parents who did not want their children to come to school (Thida–335). A few parents had told their children, "Go if you want to go. Don't go if you don't want to. I am not a teacher but I …*[interrupted]* …" (Thamma–132). Some stated blatantly, "if you don't want to go to school, drop out! No money! There is no employment. Drop out! Go to work in Thailand" (Sopha–69). The two statements showed the parents' ambivalent attitudes towards education. These parents had no expectations of their children's educational success nor employment, so they wanted their children to drop out. Vanpheng (134) asserted, "The parents say like this, so the children become disheartened. 'Going to work in Thailand and sending money back home' was a firmly rooted into the psyche of poor parents because every walk of their life was tied to livelihood for survival and accumulating financial capital in economically competitive society." Though teachers expressed these deficit views of their students' parents, they were also based on real outcomes and their experiences in the field. These experiences had gradually been accumulated over time from exchanges with their students, parents, and communal environments.

From my experiences and interactions, education has not really been a part of the cultural practice in the structure of the parents' thinking and individual experience. Schooling has always been situated outside that structure and is resisted by existing cultural practices. While few children ever accomplish a high level of academic achievement in the village, any educational successes for their own children or neighbours, has the capacity to penetrate that structure to gradually allow schooling to be embedded in the local culture. The completion of general education (upper secondary education) and then a return to farming has the same personal status as those who have had no schooling and is not valued by villagers. What villagers expect from those who continue with education is to learn what college or university they are attending and where they work afterwards. Upper secondary education graduates who were farmers in the village were often seen as bleak examples for following generations.

The teachers believed that children were generally active and motivated to go to school. Some children in higher grades, even if unwell, still wanted to go to school (Sopha), although there were

some students who were absent for several weeks and eventually dropped out. The reasons identified included ill-health, family needs such as staying with a sibling at home or tending cattle, and school issues where students were unable to manage difficult homework, had no gifts for teachers on special days, or were unable to pay school fees (Vanpheng). Those who were unwell for several weeks became less motivated, felt ashamed to return to school, and eventually dropped out (Thida). Even though parents encouraged and bought them items they wanted, the children did not want to return to school. The class room environment was expected to be a factor in students' dropping out of school, but the study has yet to determine this.

6.1.3 Challenges to school internal efficiency

School internal efficiency in this study refers to educational indicators such as the student enrolment, retention, and academic performance. Internal efficiency in education system is a main indicator of the education quality. However, internal efficiency in this school was incumbered by the two issues of student retention and academic performance. Student retention was related to their absenteeism and the dropout rate with teachers being aware that students who were chronically absent eventually dropped out. Student absenteeism was associated with a range of factors related to family, school, and students themselves.

Family-related factors were linked to economic status, parental habitus of education, and the family situation. In terms of economic status, or economic capital, some parents could not support their children financially. When children wanted pocket money to buy something to eat and drink at school to be like their peers, some parents raised their voices at them (Thida–48), causing disappointment. Sopha gave an example of one student in her neighbourhood who had been absent for few days. The student needed a small amount of money from her parent to buy a red neck-bow. The parent refused and told the child to drop out. It is clear that economic capital plays a role in facilitating students' absenteeism and the dropout rate with the implication that if parents support their children adequately, their children would be motivated to go to school on a regular basis. If the children had be given some pocket money to buy sweets like their peers at school, they would be satisfied.

In terms of parental habitus, some families are not poor but are not interested in their children's schooling (Thida–52). These parents believe their children will never meet academic success, and there are no paid jobs available for them. This understanding has become rooted in the society in which the children live and gradually internalised in children's minds, becoming their habitus. Some of the parents relay similar messages to their children, "if you don't want to go to school, drop out! No money! Teaching job is already full; there is no vacant job position for you. Drop out and go to

work in Thailand" (Sopha–69). The perception that poor children will never succeed in schooling and be employed has been inculcated through everyday experiences within family and community. This perception then contributes to shaping local people's habitus and is reproduced over time by repeated instances of the educational failure for many generations. Parental habitus is one of several challenges that cause student absenteeism and dropouts.

The family value is another factor that causes children to miss classes. Children contribute to family by looking after younger sibling at home while parents work, they tend cattle in the rice field, and collect bamboo shoots (Sopha–30-32). Once, when a teacher called a parent about the child's absenteeism, the response was, "I do tell her to go to school, but she doesn't go". However, when the teacher went to the home, the child was holding her sibling on the waist. Vatsana (139) claimed that the harvesting season was an important factor in school absenteeism.

Another perspective on family values involved a single father, a drug addict, who did not care for his child properly. The child did not go to school regularly and had a propensity to drop out. Another example concerned an adopted boy whose father passed away, and his mother had married a new man. Unfortunately, the stepfather did not accept the boy or look after him well, and hid food from him. These two anecdotes relating to family conditions identify potential causes of frequent absenteeism and likelihood of dropping out of school. The separation of the parents is also a factor contributing to the school dropout. In this school, there were some students who had experienced the breakup of a family. After separation, the students lived with their mother who was on a low income. The mother alone could not financially support her children's education and therefore, she needed her children to stay home to help with housework or run a small business to earn money.

School factors are related to teachers' behaviours towards students in classes. Sopha (19) observed that when difficult homework was given, students were often absent because they were afraid that teachers would be angry when they discovered the students could not do the homework. According to Thida (48), some students performed poorly at school and did not want to go to school because they felt ashamed and were afraid of being punished. Although the teachers said that they never punished their students, it could be questioned as to why their students were reacted in this way.

School fees contributed to student absenteeism particularly the fees could not be paid on time. It was unclear as to whether it related to the lack of money or the parents avoiding payment. Sopha described how one student in her neighbourhood needed 30,000 Kip to pay the school fee. The student told his mother that all his classmates had already paid, and he felt ashamed despite the fact his teacher had not mentioned his name. 'Ok! Ok!' said his mother who had at that time, won

a lottery of more than a million Kip. The student told his teacher his mother would come to pay the fee but unfortunately, she did not keep her promise. The teacher went to ask the mother for the school fee two or three times, but the answer was always "Later! Later!". As a result, her child did not want to go to school because his friends asked him why he had not paid while others had already done so (Sopha–55-64). In this case it was not a lack of family economic capital but an avoidance of payment. This behaviour can be interpreted as the parents devaluing the child's education. In Bourdieusian terms, it is habitus of the parents who reproduce their social status and read the future that fits them.

The school absenteeism was also related to the *students themselves*. Students who were absent from school were frequently unwell (Thida, Sopha, Thoumma). Vanpheng said that one student after recovering from an illness did not want to return to school. The student's father told Vanpheng, "I don't know how to do, my son doesn't want to go". Vanpheng assumed that the student might feel ashamed because to return to school after a long-term absence and without parent accompaniment, he would find it hard to catch up with his classmates academically. The child had lost an interest in schooling, a connection with the school environment, his relationships with peers and teachers, and academic learning. As a result, the child may have felt alienated and uncomfortable in classes. He needed to be resettled and supported in the school environment.

Academic underachievement was another challenge to school internal efficiency. Although the teachers had attempted to increase the academic performance of the students, seven problems were uncovered during the interview with the principal and the focus-group discussion with teachers. The first was related to the student absenteeism that impacted on the academic performance. Sopha confirmed that the students who frequently skipped classes underperformed academically (Sopha–94). The second was related to the prevalence of students' rote learning rather than learning to read and write. The students learned and remembered like parrots (Thida and Sopha–217), describing how students remembered verbally, but were unable to read the words. Some students could read but could not write (Thamma–19). Thamma (95) claimed that the students did not study at home but watched television and knew all the TV programs, movies, and actors. Thida regarded the students as naughty (Thida–35). The third problem concerned the under-aged students enrolled at this school. Some students were younger than six because their parent lied about their age (Thida–205). When her child did not participate in class activities, Thamma complained that her son could not sit still in his class: "My 4-year-old student doesn't want to be in the class; he usually plays outside" (Thamma–127).

The fourth problem was related to parents who did not help their children study at home. For instance, one child asked her mother for help, "Mum! Mum! My teacher told me to study with you at home". "I'm not your teacher. If I want to be a teacher, I won't have sent you to school", was the mother's response. Some parents complained that the teachers were not doing a good job, as their children could not read and write well. The principal asked if they helped their children learn at home. One parent answered, 'No', as the child did not study but only watched TV. Some parents allowed their children aged two or three go off to school with their school-aged children. In one instance, a little child disturbed her sister to the extent that she could not concentrate on the lesson. When the teacher asked where parents were, some replied, 'at home', while others said, 'going to collect bamboo shoots'. One teacher expressed her view on this case:

> In fact, we are not happy that the student brings a sibling to the class because they make a noise, run around the class, occasionally have an accident and cry. Then the teacher gets blamed. The teacher also loses concentration on teaching. (Sopha–123-126)

This issue stems from limited economic capital of the family. If the family had sufficient resources for daily survival, the parents might be able to look after the young child at home. This incident also demonstrates that the girl who brought her sibling to school is considered to have a high interest in education as she did not want to miss classes to stay with her sibling at home. It can be concluded that economic capital of the family has an impact on lack of parental cooperation.

The fifth problem concerned teaching staff. Poor student achievement can be attributed to the fact that teachers did not have teaching plans and teaching aids and did not pay attention to low performing students (Vatsana–48). The teachers emphasise quantity rather than quality (Thida–236). That is, finishing the textbook on time is important to meet the demands of the educational system. The teachers are required to finish a set number of chapters in each semester. However, the teachers have to rely on their own techniques such as moving slowly if the chapter is difficult and skimming through if it is easy to understand (Thida–249). Half of the teaching techniques come from the pedagogical advisor, and the other half are the teacher's own methodologies (Thamma and Thida–253). Advice from pedagogical professionals is not always followed because of the need to complete the curriculum by the end of school year. Completion is important because it demonstrates that the students have learnt all skills prescribed in the curriculum.

The sixth problem is the fact that the teachers often help their students pass the tests. They give generous scores to students who may have actually failed. If many students receive low scores, the DESB blames the teachers for their poor teaching and questions whether the teachers come to

school regularly (Sopha–235). It can be claimed that it is neither corruption nor demands of the system, but a teacher strategy to protect the image of the school as well as themselves.

The final challenge to the academic performance is associated with textbook content. Focus-group discussions with the teachers reveal that textbook contents are problematic and can impact on teaching and learning quality and student academic performance. Thida (200) commented that the activities were quite difficult for the students, especially for Grade 1. Some activities in the Grade 1 textbook of Lao language were more suitable for Grade 3 than the Grade 1 students (Sopha–225). The math textbook for Grade 1 and 2, had chapters that were 3-4 pages long (Sopha and Thamma–219) and it contained too many activities for the students and took a long time to finish. The dilemma for teachers then, is if they move at too fast a teaching pace, the students do not understand. If the teachers focus on helping the students individually in classes, they run out of time and may not complete the textbook (Thoumma–233). If teachers teach at too slow or too fast a pace, they are cautioned by the pedagogical advisor. Therefore, they have to be time conscious and select what to teach (Thida–231). One teacher demonstrated her own technique of how to complete the textbook by the end of the school year:

> I also select only the important points from the textbook for my students. For teaching about a traditional festival in Lao PDR, I write a few questions on the chalkboard, asking about the name of the festival, the date and place where it is held. I want my students to learn these important points. If including all, I cannot complete the textbooks in one school year. (Sopha–224-230)

6.1.4 Enhancement of school internal efficiency

To improve internal efficiency in primary education, the DESB develops strategic plans for the schools to use in conjunction with VEDC and the parents. In order to have all school-aged children enrolled in school, at the start of a school year, the VEDC organised a village meeting urging parents to enrol their school-aged children. The Parent Association updated statistics of all preschool and school aged children and their parents' contact information and provided this data to the school. The teachers checked student enrolment against the statistics to identify unregistered names and made phone calls to the parents to achieve full enrolment of all school aged children. If parents did not have enough money for school fees, they were allowed to pay late. If the parents were very poor as verified by the village head, they were not required to pay the school fees as the school wanted to give all children the opportunity to come to school and study until finishing primary school.

- **Enhancing student retention**

Regular attendance at school is important for students to develop academic, linguistic and social skills (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ferrell, Nance, Torres, & Torres, 2014). Students who attend school regularly can achieve skills related to work such as perserverance, problem-solving, and the ability to work with others to accomplish a goal (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Therefore, it is vital to retain all students in school. To achieve this, teachers place emphasis on reducing student absenteeism because students who are chronically absent as early as the first grade are likely to eventually drop out (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013). In this school, if students missed a day of school, the teacher made phone calls to the parent. If the students were absent for three consecutive days, the teacher went to see the parents to find out the reason. The prevalent reason was illness or working at the farm with parents (Sopha–141).

Too heavy a learning load without a balance of socio-cultural activities can be a cause of absenteeism and school dropouts (Şahin, Arseven, & Kılıç, 2016). Therefore, to encourage regular attendance, the school included sporting activities and dancing practices in the school timetable. The sporting activities were sepak takraw, volleyball, soccer, petonque, and long jump while dancing practice was scheduled for the late afternoon on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Furthermore, the principal visited the parents to inform them of the value of education and encourage them to enrol their school-aged children:

> Last Saturday I went to harvest rice. In fact, I didn't want to go harvesting *because I am too* lazy to do this work, but my purpose was to speak to parents and encourage them to send their children to school. I knew that the parents of the students who were often absent from school were there. When they saw me, they were all surprised. One child said that she wanted to go to school but she didn't have money. Her mother passed away; she lives with her poor father.

The story illustrates the school principal's dedication to increasing student retention by mobilising the social network of connections with the parents. The principal learnt that one child dropped out of school because of a lack of money and it was not because of the child's disinterest in schooling. In that same week, the principal planned to visit another family whose child did not come to school. That family was poor and needed the child to tend the cattle because it was rice harvesting season. The homeroom teacher visited them a few times. This personal approach adopted by the teachers was used with students from Grade 1 to Grade 5, but different individuals, every year, and eventually most came. (Vatsana–97-128)

- **Enhancing academic performance**

To enhance students' academic performance, the teachers applied several strategies. The teachers developed teaching plans and had them checked by the principal. The teachers were required to produce teaching aids such as pictures, cards, and other visual aids to support teaching activities. If teachers taught without visual aids, the students could not understand the lesson well (Vanpheng–301). Teachers posed questions and provided different group activities appropriate to their learning levels. Sopha divided the chalkboard into three columns for low, average, and high performers. She gave an example of the way she taught her students:

> For teaching the Lao language, I start from classifying the lesson. I teach the weak students basic vowels, but for the better students, I teach them the higher level. For teaching math, I also give them different levels of complexities. These are both classwork and homework. For doing classwork, I divide the blackboard into three columns for weak, average and good students. The teacher assigns the work to them but never lets them know that they are weak or good students. (Sopha–165-169)

This teaching practice indicated that the teacher recognised her students' learning abilities and paid close attention to the different levels. Sopha (181) claimed that some contents were not suitable for the rural students, so adaptated the content to suit the rural students' experiences. For example, the teachers referred to a local festival with which the students were familiar. The teachers avoided using specific linguistic structures and types of curricula that were understood by the urban students but alien to their rural counterparts. When lessons were adapted to suit and matched with the capital the student brought in their 'virtual school bag' (Thomson, 2002) to the school field, rural students felt comfortable at school. The lesson should not only follow the contents of the textbooks but should involve the world around the students as their learning context. The teachers were free to use different teaching techniques to enable their students to learn better. When teaching the Grade 1 students, Vanpheng held her student's hand to help them with writing alphabet. If they felt tired, she told them a story or had them sing a song for relaxation.

Every week the teachers had a meeting to discuss how to improve their students' academic performance. The teachers organised extra classes every weekday from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. to help the academic underperformers catch up with their peers. The teachers also complimented those who performed well to encourage them and make them even more enthusiastic about learning (Vatsana–16). Vanpheng encouraged her students to study at home by telling them a well-intentioned fabrication:

> 'I will go around the village to see who study and who do not study but watch TV at home. I will punish those who do not study at home'. A parent told me the following day that her child did not

watch TV but studied. I noticed that the children could do better in class after they had studied at home. (Vanpheng–264)

It is clear that 'punishment' was an action that was embedded in the pedagogy and had been practised in school and was well known to several generations of students. Although they had never experienced it, when the teacher mentioned the word 'punishment', it caused a sense of fear. There is evidence to suggest that the students who study at home can bring about a noticeable change in their academic performance in the class. This implies that encouraging students to study at home is, is essential for student learning achievement. When the teacher was absent or unwell, the students were not allowed to go home early. Another teacher or the teacher from the next class took responsibility to provide classwork or an activity for the students to do (Vatsana–69).

6.2 School Two

School Two, situated in Village Two, consisted of two buildings but at different sites. The first, accommodating both Grades 1 and 2, was an old building in a run-down condition and located within the village. Its timbered walls had several cracks and holes. The windows were permanently closed with nailed timbers, making the rooms dark. The classroom had a concreted floor but had no ceiling. In summer, the rooms would be very warm, which made the students perspire. Tables and benches in each classroom were sufficient for the students, however, there was no teacher office, no library, no toilet, nor a water supply. The school building was not connected to electricity although the village was. There were a few trees growing naturally on the school ground but not enough to provide shade for teachers and students on sunny days.

The second building for Grades 3 to 5 was located approximately 500 metres from the first one. The school building was four years old. It was an unfinished building, but it was operational. The classrooms had a dirt floor and waist-high bricked walls at the front but had no windows on the back walls and no ceilings. The tables and benches for each classroom were sufficient. As this location was relatively new, there were some termite domes, small wooden stumps and many naturally grown trees in front of the school building. Under a tree became an open office where the teachers met and chatted during breaks and where they held official meetings.

- **School personnel and students**

The school principal, Sintham, lived in a nearby village approximately two kilometres away. He commuted to work by motorbike. He had limited opportunities to socialise with the students' parents or to get involved in village activities. He had graduated from primary school and had undertaken

pedagogical training. He had been a primary school teacher for more than 30 years in three different primary schools in the district. He had taught for about ten years in his own village school before moving to work in this school in 1995.

At that time, he could not afford to buy a bicycle, so he had to walk from his village in the early morning and return to it in evening. The commute was approximately 40 to 50 minutes a day. After many years, he bought a bicycle, so he could travel faster. In the rainy season, he was able to stay in his farmhouse which was closer to the school and it was also the reason why he was allocated this school because of his farm's close proximity. After the rice harvesting was over, he moved back into the village.

The deputy principal, Vilad, was young, had worked for five years, and was appointed to this position for a year. His home village and family were in a neighbouring district. He went back to his family every Friday and returned to school on Monday morning by motorbike. During weekdays he shared a home with the headman of village. Apart from teaching, Vilad helped the school principal deal with administrative and managerial work. There was much work to be done at the beginning of the academic year including collecting student statistics and reporting to the DESB which on occasion had to be done urgently. To submit that document, Vilad lost almost half a day, leaving early in the morning and returning to school around 10 or 10.30 am. While he preferred not to be away from school for the whole day when it was not necessary, he spent time with the DESB staff to ensure that the correct information needed had been included. Vilad revealed that some teachers liked to have social drinks when they met with friends from other schools. He did not drink, so he never joined them but preferred to return directly as there was urgent work waiting for him at the school.

Vilad wanted to move back to his home village because he missed his family. His wife did not understand his responsibilities and challenged him about spending money. Vilad explained:

> There is an expense when there are festivals, wedding parties, and social activities where I have to contribute some money, but my wife misunderstands this. I understand her feeling that she alone looks after the children and my parents. Since I have worked here, looking after all family members including my parents has become her responsibility. (Vilad – 318)

Broken relationships between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law cause problems in families and such was the case with Vilad's family. Vilad worried a lot about this, especially when they were unwell and if he did not go back to see his family, his parents-in-law would not be happy. Vilad was also concerned about his wife's safety in commuting to her school located six kilometres away from home. The toughest time for her was in a rainy season when the road was muddy and slippery, and

taking their son to school with her on a motorcycle made it even more difficult. Furthermore, the road to her school was through deserted woods without villages on the road sides.

There were three female teachers at the school who were in their probationary period. Two of the teachers named Nantana and Phonthip came from different nearby villages and were in the second year of their teaching careers. The third who was native to this village had just been in her teaching job for a few months. The three teachers graduated from the same teacher training college in the province and were allocated to work at this school. Nantana and Phonthip came to school in the morning and went back after their afternoon classes by motorbike. At lunch time, they stayed at their colleague's home because the school did not have an office for them. These probationary teachers were not paid for the work, so their parents continued supporting them. Despite the financial hardship, there were no alternatives. They had to persevere, show accountability and a positive work performance while waiting for an opportunity of recruitment.

The students were all from the same village and ethnic group. As of the school year 2014–15, the total number of the students in this school was 113, with 51 being girls. Many students were over-aged because some had been enrolled late after they were 6 years old, while some had repeated the same grade. For example, some of the Grade 5 students at the school were 13 years old. The students in both locations were not strictly required to wear school uniform and did not need to have pocket money because there was no canteen at this school. They were required only to have notebooks, pens, pencils, rubbers, and rulers. All families could afford to buy these learning materials for their children in the primary school.

The school principal, Sintham, revealed that the students in this village rarely dropped out, and their learning performance was quite good. Sintham was pleased to hear the praise given by lower secondary school teachers who said that the students from this school academically outperformed those from other schools in the neighbourhood. In the school year 2013–14, one student from this primary school was selected as a representative of the best primary school students in the district to participate in the academic test at the provincial level. However, there still was a wide range of student academic performance levels in this school. Vilad observed that there were 4–5 students in each grade who could not read and write the Lao language or perform basic math functions satisfactorily. When comparing this school with the schools in the town and its vicinity, Vilad noted that his students' literacy levels were still low. According to the DESB's educational report 2014–15, however, nearly all of the primary schools in the district had similar statistics in terms of enrolment,

retention and academic performance (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). It was therefore difficult to differentiate which schools outperformed or underperformed.

- **Teaching method**

The teaching method introduced by the DESB was student-centred. In the beginning of each school year, all primary school principals in the district met with the DESB. The pedagogical advisor demonstrated how to develop and implement a teaching plan. However, new teachers to the school school would continue to apply the methodology they learnt at teacher training college, leaving the principal unsure if both teaching methods would be compatible.

The student-centred approach has an emphasis on students' participation. Students are encouraged to examine prior knowledge of a subject. For example, in a lesson about animals at this school, individual students were given a few minutes to think of animals in their household and then tell the class. Vilad joked, "Some students do not even know what animals they have in their own family…*[laughing]*…, whereas some do not even know what animals are". These students had to learn by listening to their peers and then transfer new knowledge to their own situation and give informed answers. Vilad (256–258) thought that this teaching approach was appropriate because it focused on knowledge around students' daily experiences. The lesson contents were adapted to suit real life in a specific locality. While the DESB pedagogical advisor demonstrated how to implement it, the student-centred approach was not fully applied in this school because the teachers were not confident or felt they did not have the time to adopt this approach to teaching:

> We cannot do well as they [the pedagogic advisors] do, due to our limited understanding. I see some teachers in our school have their teaching plans, but I do not have them for all lessons because of my workload. I cannot do well because I do not develop teaching plans and teaching aids such as pictures. I have only textbooks. (Sintham–134)

As the student-centred method was only implemented with limited success, the conventional teacher-centred approach was generally employed in this school. Particularly, in the early grades, teachers found it a challenge to apply the student-centred method because the students were too young to carry out activities. One teacher said:

> We use student-centered, but students mostly do not know anything. As a result, the teacher-centred method is employed for giving instructions. In other words, students do not play a main role in the class, but teachers do. Teachers have to explain in order to make them understand and help them answer questions correctly. It is not suitable for students who have not yet had broad thinking. (Nantana–185-190)

The teacher's comment of 'students mostly do not know anything' was a judgement on the students' knowledge in relation to the textbook contents. In fact, the students knew many things in their daily lives, but the teacher did not recognise those kinds of knowledge nor did they organise class activities around it. The teachers merely followed the textbooks and did not prepare any teaching plans. As the contents of textbook were remote from the students' local knowledge, there was an element of truth in the teacher's judgment and hence it was difficult for the teachers to organise student-centred activities.

6.2.1 School leadership and management

The Principal's leadership significantly impacts on student learning since it is "second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning" (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 27) and plays an important role in guiding teachers, students, and parents toward accomplishing common educational goals. In this school, the researcher identified three core leadership practices which included establishing school goals and expectations, maintaining internal harmony, and building external relations.

The school did not set goals. It worked toward achieving the goals, set by the DESB. According to Vilad, the school focused specifically on increasing the net enrolment rate, promotion rate, and basic literacy skills. The school wanted to achieve these goals with the expectation that children would be enrolled in Grade 1 when they turned six. Vilad also suggested that if the students failed to pass the academic test, the promotion rate would be affected. In contrast, if the students performed well, the grade promotion rate would certainly increase, and repetition rate would decrease. Therefore, the school had to focus on increasing the basic literacy level so that all students complete primary school.

However, Sintham refused to discuss the DESB's goal; he was focussed on the school's goal. He stated that the school concentrated first on the school infrastructure and then on student learning:

> After we have a permanent school building, we can aim at improving student learning. But now it seems that the villagers do not want to contribute to the new school construction. The plan for constructing more classrooms is approved, but the funds have been redirected for the temple restoration. (Sintham–165-168)

The school had clear expectations of their students. According to Sintham, the students were supposed to perform well academically, behave appropriately, and show respect to the elderly. However, there was no written form of this expectation. It was a collective value embedded in the

minds of individual teachers. Vilad was really concerned about his students' study habits and academic performance:

> I think about myself, I felt unhappy with myself. I want all students to have knowledge and good jobs after graduating from higher education institutions. I do not want them to behave badly in society. If the new generations are not civil, how the country will be developed. If they are like this, how we can hand over our hopes to them. (Vilad–208-213)

To strengthen internal relationships among teachers, the school principal expected all of them to be involved in school improvement activities with the deputy principal assisting the school principal in making plans for school development and its implementation. Unfinished work was re-planned to meet current situations and re-implemented, with the principal delegating responsibilities where appropriate. A meeting was held every Thursday afternoon to ensure all teachers understood the DESB plan and put it into practice. The meeting gave each teacher the opportunity to report issues such as personal concerns, teaching matters, and student-related issues and seek solutions from colleagues. The principal acknowledged that he enjoyed coming to school and being with colleagues and his students, as it made him happy and relaxed. The teachers also thrived at school because they were able to communicate openly and had respect for each other as friends.

To build relationships with the parents, the school invited them to watch student activities mainly in the form of dance performances. Most parents showed interest in attending such activities and even made donations to the school. The educational improvement in this village progressed well because of the cooperation and support given by the headman of the village, the Parent Association, and the Women's Union.

The school principal collaborated with the VEDC to have all children in the village enrolled and retained in school. The VEDC disseminated school information to parents and encouraged them to enrol their school-age children in school. When the school principal identified children who were not enrolled or those who had dropped out of school, he reported them to the headman of village. The children's non-enrolment or absence was publicised in village meetings ensuring that most children went to school and only a few did not.

The VEDC was also instrumental in supporting the school development plan. The school passed the plan to the VEDC to approve, and then communicated it to the parents at a village meeting. At the time of this research study, the school had a plan to extend more classrooms attached to the new building to accommodate Grades 1 and 2. Sintham suggested that with two locations, it was difficult

to manage and accomodate all teachers. If all classrooms were in the same location, it would provide flexibility to cover any teacher absences.

6.2.2 Teachers 'views on parents and students

Generally, the parents in this village acknowledged the benefits of education. They wanted their children to have higher education and paid employment. Sintham stated that most of the parents had positive attitudes towards education and were interested in sending their children to school. Only a small number were not enthusiastic and failed to build relationships with others in the village. Sintham acknowledged that it was difficult to motivate these parents because they were not interested, and reacted angrily with, "Don't talk so much! You have nothing, either". Some parents jested to their friends, "Although your children go to school, they will never be colonels or generals…*[laughing]…*" (Sintham–67). They had low expectations that any one in the village could succeed in education, secure paid employment, and nor did they see the possibility that their children and others in the village could achieve educational success.

Vilad said that the parents in this village did encourage their children to go to school and study more at home. However, if the children refused, the parents gave up easily and said they were, "tired with telling them; they do not go" and losing interest in supporting their children in education. Vilad showed parents their children's learning results every month, but while they accepted the information, they had no further interaction or simply did not know how to help their children. When the teachers persisted with constant reminders about encouraging their children to study at home and reducing the time watching television, Vilad noted that the children's learning performance improved positively. If the reminders ceased, the situation gradually returned to the default position (Vilad–49).

In front of teachers, parents always stated that they did tell their children to go to school. The reality is that parents only say, "Go to school". If their child replies, "No", the parents do nothing and respond, "It's up to you if you don't want to be literate". Vilad believes that some parents say they encourage their children, hiding the fact that they have little parental control over their children. The students who were well supported went to school regularly and outperformed others. Vilad continued:

> Sometimes when informally chatting with the parents of low performers, the parents said, "don't know how to help him. If he wants to quit, we can do nothing". It seems that parents are indecisive as to whether to support or not. I can say that parents are still reluctant about their children's education. If parents are stricter on their children, not allow them to go out at night, the children will be obedient. But parents ignore it, let them hang around in the village. Teachers cannot tell

them in the public place to go home for study; it is inappropriate. It is parents' responsibility to do so. (Vilad–69-77)

Vilad guessed that most parents allowed their children to decide whether they attended school because the parents had limited knowledge and ideas about education and how to motivate their children, indicating parents did not have the relevant cultural capital to negotiate their position in their children's learning process. Therefore, the parents who had children in school relied on teachers to educate their children.

Nantana complained that in the early grades, students did not pay attention to lessons when teachers were giving explanations. They lacked concentration unless strictly supervised. Sintham also agreed that it was difficult to involve his students in the learning process. He said that when he asked for a volunteer to answer his question in classes, no students were willing to raise their hands even though they knew the answer. Some lacked confidence to display their knowledge and were reluctant to respond to questions.

Culturally, rural people are reticent to present themselves before the group. They are naturally taught to listen, observe and follow what the community members accept. This disposition has shaped children's ways of thinking, behaving, expressing and presenting themselves in their society and is internalised as children's habitus. When the children are at school, they feel underconfident and uncomfortable to challenge new ways of thinking and changing behaviours because their habitus is different from what is required for interactive activities.

6.2.3 Challenges to school internal efficiency

In this school, the student enrolment was not a concerning issue. Only a few over-aged children were not enrolled in school. In the previous school year, the enrolment rate of six-year-old children was reported by the principal to be at 100 percent. However, in this school year, there were still many seven-year-old children who had never been enrolled which conflicts with the statistics suggesting every six-year-old child was enrolled. The discrepancy occurred because the VEDC had obsolete statistics of the village population. The Parent Association and the former school principal had also produced inaccurate statistics with the school submitting an imprecise report to the DESB.

One challenge to school internal efficiency was related to student retention. Vilad confirmed that the number of the students who were absent had increased. The teachers recognised that those who were frequently absent were likely to drop out and the reasons for the student being absent were associated with a lack of family support and the students themselves.

The family contributed to the student absenteeism in many aspects. Some children whose parents worked in Thailand lived with their grandparents. Sintham gave an example of a Grade-3 student who lived with his grandparents and always missed classes to stay with his younger sibling at home or tend water buffalos after the rice harvesting season, while his grand-parents were away. Sintham noticed that the student did not want to miss the classes, but there was no choice for him. Another aspect was related to family economic status. Children were frequently absent from school because they needed to cut sugar cane to earn some money for their family. At the sugar cane plantation, the children met with other children; they had fun there, enjoyed making some money and gradually lost interest in schooling, eventually dropping out. Although the rice harvesting season was over, some students still skipped classes, but the parents ignored this:

> For example, a few days ago a Grade 2 student was at the farm with parents playing alone. Don't know why the parents did not take him to school to play with brothers, sisters or peers. The parents do not care about this. They let their child to make his own decision. If the child misses the class for many days, he will not want to return to it any more. (Vilad–110-112)

There were some explanations for this case. The parents might not have wanted to leave a young child at home while they stayed at the farm for the whole day. Another explanation was that parents did not encourage their child when did not want to go to school, because they considered going to school less important than going to farm. While parents appear to accede to their child's decision, their attitude had been shaped by the fact that even if the children are in school, eventually their future remains unchanged.

Some students or parents failed to inform teachers why they were absent. When the teachers checked with the parents, some requested, "Please allow him/her to be absent some more days". Sintham said:

> Recently, there was the rice harvesting, some parents informed me that they needed their children to help them. I asked them, "How many days?" "One week", they replied. After one week, their children did not return to classes. If we did not go to meet their parents, it was hard for them to return to classes. Oh! it is difficult, difficult. It results from parents who ask for this and that for their children. (Sintham)

Vilad estimated that on average 70 percent of the students attended school. However, in each class nearly half of the students underperformed academically. There were only around five to six students who achieved well in each class; the rest were at average. Most of those who underperformed at school were likely to miss classes without informing their teachers. The teachers had no idea of when they would be absent and when they would attend the class. Vilad gave an example:

> Today one of my students, who is a low performer, has gone to cut sugar cane, and yesterday another low performer went to cut firewood. Sometimes I think their parents agree to their

> children ś absence from school. Or they are tired of pushing them. But when I ask the parents, they say they always tell their children to go to school, but it is the children ś personal decision to go or not. The parents can do nothing. (Vilad)

Good students or their parents always gave teachers reasons for absences. The main reason was related to tending cattle or staying at home with a young sibling (Vilad–56-67).

Phonthip and Nantana (67-72) said that some Grade 1 and 2 students, attended classes in the morning but did not come in the afternoon. This is because on the way back to school they, particularly the boys, truanted to play with friends. When the teachers asked their parents, they said that their children had already gone to school. When parents learnt about the truancy, they were angry at their children's behaviours. However, the percentage of students who were frequently absent was small.

There was also a likelihood of dropping out even for those who regularly went to school. However, there were not many. The Grades 3 and 4 students normally did not drop out, but there was an increase in the rate for Grade 5 students especially those who were older than their peers. There were some students who were hardly ever absent in a school year, particularly those who were from families where their parents paid close attention to their children's education and were extemely supportive.

The standard of student academic performance presented great challenges for the school community. Factors related to this included limited opportunities for teacher professional development in the school and, according to Vilad, there was no culture of community learning at the school. The teachers did not have opportunities to share knowledge and experiences with each other. The school principal also agreed that there was no pedagogical sharing among the teachers, but he had no capacity to organise it because of lack of available staff to cover his class while he observed another. As he was still concerned about teaching quality, he only asked his teachers how they taught and what problems or difficulties they encountered. In addition to the lack of the professional development, the teachers had no teaching plans or teaching aids but taught mainly from the teaching manual copying the lesson on the chalkboard and asking the students to copy it into their notebook.

Most of the class time was used for copying and explaining the lesson rather than time allowed for students to practise the skills that were necessary. With limited time to learn in classes, doing homework and studying more at home were very important if the students were to perform better. Vilad noticed that his students who studied at home rather than watching televison or fraternising

with friends, outperformed those who did not. Vilad believed that parents should take stricter control to encourage good study habits but felt that if he put too much pressure on the parents, his intent would be negatively interpreted. This study identified that the way that the family members lived and viewed education formed the habitus of the community. It was difficult for the teachers to change traditional behaviours of the parents as the teachers could not guarantee successful schooling for their children.

Vilad stated that the students who underperformed academically belonged mainly to illiterate parents because they could not help their children with studying at home. Phontip added that when the parents were told to help their children with homework, they were unable because they did not know how to read and write. It meant the parents did not have the cultural capital that was required to support their children's schooling. Furthermore, Nantana was aware that some of her students came to school without having breakfast. She said that around 11 a.m., these students needed to stop the lesson because they felt hungry. When she asked them if they had eaten breakfast, their answer was, 'Yes, but not much'. Students who did not have enough breakfast certainly felt hungry in the class affecting their mood and concentration while studying.

The classrooms in this school were furnished with chalkboards, tables and benches for teachers and students. While the teachers had textbooks, most students did not, so it was difficult for teachers to deliver knowledge to their students effectively. This is because the textbooks were at the heart of the teaching and learning process and were the main sources of cultural capital. Sintham expressed:

> The problems we are facing at the moment is the lack of textbooks for Grade 3 until Grade 5. For the Grade 3, there are only three textbooks of Lao language, three textbooks of math, and three textbooks of World Around Us. But for Grade 1 and 2, there are more than enough *so* it is difficult for us to realise our vision. (Sintham)

The lack of textbooks was yet another challenge for the rural teachers when attempting to improve student learning performance. The parents did not buy the textbooks for their children because it was expensive (Sintham). Therefore, no students had their own textbooks. The DESB's response was to ask them to wait. In classes, Sintham explained how the teachers taught their students with the delay of the textbooks:

> The students are put in group of six to share one textbook. They also have to copy lessons from the chalkboard into their notebooks. However, at home, their parents cannot read their handwriting, so the parents don't know how to help them. It is more problematic for the parents who have limited reading skills. (Sintham)

Vilad also spoke about the situation:

> We are facing this problem of the lack of textbooks at the moment. The students only take notes from the chalkboard. Because of this, it holds back our teaching process to complete the curriculum. The students do not have textbooks for studying at home. Although the school principal reported this issue to the DESB, there is no solution because the DESB is also waiting for the textbooks from the Ministry of Education and Sports. I think that the chalkboards and the textbooks for Grade 1 and 2 are supported by some international organisations because there is a logo of the organisation and national flags on the corner of the chalkboards and the cover pages of the textbooks. If the international organisations did not provide these textbooks, the Grade 1 and 2 students would not have sufficient textbooks as well. The Grade 5 students use old textbooks, received a long time agd. (Vilad–260-273)

Traditionally, textbooks are lent by the school in which the children are enrolled. Many parents might not be aware they have to buy textbooks for their children or even know which textbooks to buy as they have no experience. The parents only know that they had to buy uniforms, schoolbags, notebooks, pens, pencils, rubbers, and rulers for their children every school year.

Vilad said that some teachers lent their own textbook to their students. However, as the teachers had only one textbook, only one student could borrow for studying at home. The lack of the textbooks created difficulties in the teaching and learning process which led to poorer student learning outcomes. The students had a short time to do school work in classes; they did not see a range of examples which could help them understand with more speed and clarity. The students who were slower to understand encountered more problems in learning than others including being confused by their own handwriting if it was illegible. Vilad complained that they had been waiting for textbooks year after year but without success. Without textbooks, it was hard for the teachers to teach, the students to study at home, and the parents to help their children.

6.2.4 Enhancement of school internal efficiency

As the school had a record of children belonging to each age group in the village, the teachers could estimate the number of the students to be enrolled in each grade. The teachers also had a record of all parents' contact information. At the beginning of each school year, the teachers checked the list of the students enrolled against the list in the record. When the teachers identified those who had not yet been enrolled, their names would be reported to the headman of village so that they could communicate with the parents. The village headman then announced the parents' names in a village meeting. Consequently, many children went to school and only a few did not.

The deputy principal said that the students who were frequently absent and repeated the same grade were likely to drop out. Therefore, increasing retention rate was associated with decreasing absenteeism, number of repeaters and the student drop out rate. To reduce absenteeism, the teachers visited the parents of those students who were frequently absent. After three visits, if the student was still absent, both the school principal and VEDC came to see the parents. At every visit, the parent had to sign the record book as evidence of school communication and parental contractual agreement to have their children go to school. Sintham confirmed that frequent visits by teachers put pressure on parents to send their children to school regularly because if children were absent for a long time, they would not want to return to school again.

In classes, Sintham inspired the students by telling them his own story and providing examples of people who had a good jobs and incomes because of education. He reminded students that if they did not pay attention to the study, they would become low paid workers. Students who tried hard and put effort into their study were rewarded by Sintham and Vilad with praise and attention.

Outside classes, particularly in the afternoons, boys were encouraged to play soccer, while girls practised dancing. The teachers also tried to separate the students who were frequently absent and put each to play with the active students. Sintham stated that this strategy was set up to help students build new relationships with new friends so that they might all come to school together. In the school, the teachers developed further strategies to prevent discrimination, bullying and drug use that discouraged the students to go to school.

To reduce the rate of repeating grades, the school applied the 'progressive promotion policy' developed by the MoES. The teachers organised extra classes for underperforming students in order to help them enhance their learning performance. The teachers also allowed their students to take semester examinations several times until all of them had passed. First, the teachers gave an identical academic test to all students in the same grade to see how well the students could perform. The students who failed the first test then took an easier test. Those who did not pass the second test were given a third test with clearer explanations and hints which resembled the correct answers. The test became easier and easier until all students passed and were promoted.

The teachers applied this strategy to retain students in school. If the students repeated the same grade, it was likely they would drop out. The primary goal was to reach a high retention rate to meet the target set by the DESB rather than demonstrating what the students had learnt from the curriculum. Therefore, student achievement was measured by the length of time the student remained at school.

To enhance students' academic performance, the teachers used a range of strategies. Sintham usually gave his students high marks because he believed that this was a way to encourage his students to study hard and go to school regularly. He also encouraged them to practise reading and writing more: "You have done well. But if you practise more, I am sure you will perform better than this, and your handwriting will be nicer" (Sintham–198). The teachers also told the parents to supervise their children's school work at home. Vilad noticed that there was a slight increase in the student academic performance if they studied at home. If the parents were unable to read and write, Vilad advised the students to have tutoring with their neighbours who were in the same grade or higher grade. Vilad asked neighbours to tutor the underperformers in the evenings. Moreover, Vilad provided incentives such as gifts of notebooks, pens, and pencils for those who performed well. However, Vilad did recognise that it worked for those who achieved well but low achievers continued to perform poorly. That is, extrinsic rewards did not work well for them.

The teachers organised extra classes for those with learning difficulties. Three or four teachers helped them with reading words, spelling words, and pronouncing them as many students had problems with reading even simple vowels such as /i/, /i:/, /ʌ/, /a:/. Some of the students were able to read vowels and write consonants but could not pronounce the words after combining consonants and vowels. The extra classes were organised for two hours a week, every Friday afternoon. In the regular class, students with different levels of learning were allocated seats together with the higher performers asked to teach the lower level achievers in the class. The teachers also used learning aids such as chopsticks to help students understand math concepts by demonstrating how to add or subtract numbers (Vilad–129-144).

6.3 School Three

School Three was located about 500 metres from Village Three. The school building was in reasonably good condition on a large tract of land. There were three classrooms for primary school pupils and one room for the kindergarten. There were two combined classes–Grade 2 shared a room with Grade 3, and Grade 4 with Grade 5. Although the two classes shared a room, there were sufficient seats for all the students and the classes were not crowded. On the walls inside the classrooms, there was a Lao map, flag of Asian countries, a Lao alphabet sheet, a class organisation chart, proverbs and mottos, anti-drug information, hygiene information, and drawings of flowers. There was also a cupboard in each room for the teachers to store textbooks, notebooks and other teaching materials. Interestingly, the students were not allowed to wear shoes or slippers inside the classrooms to keep the concreted floor clean.

The school had no teacher office, no library, nor a toilet. It did not have electricity or a water supply. During class time, all windows were opened to allow breezes to go through and closed when there was strong wind and dust. As there was no office, the small mango tree in front of the school building provided shade and became an open office for the teachers to take a rest during break time.

In this school, there were only three staff–the principal teaching the combined class of Grade 2 and 3, a deputy principal teaching Grade 1, and a general teacher in charge of the combined class of Grade 4 and 5. The principal, Duangdy, was approximately 40 years old, had been teaching for 16 years in this school and had been a principal for six years. He graduated from the teacher training college in the province and held an Advanced Diploma. He was not native to this district but came to live with his wife in the nearby village, which was about 700 metres away from the school. The principal had attended a two-day training course on school management provided by the CIED II (Community Initiative for Education Development Phase II) since his appointment as principal. His training covered school development, personnel management, and school management. Being a school principal, his responsibilities meant that he was absent from his class whenever he had to attend meetings two or three times a month within the school and sometimes in the DESB. When he was not available, the deputy principal had responsibility for both his own and the principal's class. Hence, the deputy principal would have had to teach three different grades, Grade 1 – 3, at the same time.

The Grade 1 teacher, the deputy principal, Sukan, was 59 years old. He was not native to Village Three but came to live in this village and work in this school after he married his wife who was born in this village. He was the only a teacher who communicated with the VEDC and parents in Village Three. Sukan had not studied at teacher training college but was recruited because there was a shortage of teachers in the area. He had been a teacher for more than 30 years, but he seldom had opportunities to attend teacher training programs. His last training program organised by the CIED II was three years ago in the use of the 5-pointed star teaching methodology, developing teaching plans, and producing teaching aids such as letter cards, number cards, pictures of animals, etc.

The general teacher, Lavan, was female and came from the neighbouring province to live with her husband who was a lower secondary school teacher in the same village as the principal. Her qualification was an Advanced Diploma in primary education teaching. She had been working as a teacher for 12 years but only for nine years in this school. She brought a two-year-old son to her class every day and let him play freely on the floor inside and outside the classroom. Two years ago,

she had some training on teaching techniques for multigrade classes and on how to develop teaching plans.

As of the school year 2015–2016, there were a total of 58 students, 27 boys and 31 girls. 50 percent of the students lived with both parents, while 21 students lived with grandparents and eight with a single parent. There were no under school-aged students, but some were overaged because of late enrolment[30] and grade repetitions. Two boys finished study after completing Grade 4 because they were overaged at 14 years old. In the previous school year (2014–2015), no students dropped out of school, but four students repeated the same grade with three of them repeating Grade 1.

All school-aged children in the village were enrolled in school, except a boy who was mute. His grandmother was concerned, and said, "I am afraid that his peers will bully him at the school. He cannot speak. His brain does not function well either". Nonetheless, the student dropout rate had decreased as a consequence of teachers' visits to the parents and the village headman's attention to motivating parents to send their children to school. All the students were from the same village and same ethnic group. Parents did not take or pick up children from school as most of them commuted to school on foot along a dirt road.

6.3.1 School leadership and management

In this school the four core school leadership practices identified were establishing school goals, supporting teacher development, and building internal and external relations. The school had its own goals which focused on the school infrastructure and worked toward achieving the DESB's goals. When asked what the school was working toward achieving, Sukan, the deputy principal answered:

> We want to have a toilet and we already talked with the village head and expect to have it finished this year. But the village head is waiting for the villagers to finish the rice harvest. Another is the teacher office. The teachers do not have an office yet. The last goal is to discuss with the village head about whether the current classroom is suitable for the kindergarten students. It will probably be established in the village. (Sukan–181-185)

Sukan did not mention developing the internal efficiency of the school which was one of the DESB's development goals. He may have been unaware because the DESB document was kept by the principal. The principal himself did not recognise these goals with any clarity:

> We work based on the DESB's goals, but I don't remember. I have the document, but I haven't read it. It is about compulsory education. All school-going aged children must be enrolled in school. The enrolment rate and retention rate must be 100%. As the DESB staff said, we are

[30] The students were enrolled after they were six years old.

> preparing to merge our education with education of the other ASEAN countries. These are the main goals of the DESB. (Sukan–75-79)

The teachers had limited opportunities to attend official professional development programs, but they created a culture of academic sharing within their school. The teachers observed the principal's class once a month, and the principal observed the teachers' class once a year. They met each month to reflect on punctuality and teaching performance. The teachers were allowed the flexibility to explore the teaching techniques that best fitted their students' learning. The 5-pointed-star teaching method was not employed in this school. Duangdy argued that:

> Regardless of the 5-pointed-star method, the important thing is how to make the students perform better academically. If all students in Grade 1, for example, are evaluated to be able to read and write Lao sentences or perform mathematically well, it means that the teachers have an effective teaching technique. (Duangdy–196-199)

The comment suggests that individual teachers could design their own teaching style and explore different teaching techniques. However, they were yet to identify teaching techniques that were more effective than the conventional ones which were dominant in this school.

The researcher observed that the school staff had a good working relationship. Several times a day, there was teacher interation under the small mango tree in front of the school. Their conversations were friendly. However, they mainly talked about their day-to-day life at home rather than at school. For much of the time, the female teacher, Lavan, was busy with her son, so conversations with her were often interrupted.

There was also a friendly relationship between the teachers and the students. The researcher did not see teachers exert power over their students either inside or outside the classrooms. The students were not observed to be fearful of their teachers even when student conduct in class was not appropriate or acceptable. Teachers rarely raised their voices as a means of controlling student behaviours.

The school had built relationships with the parents/guardians, the headman of village, and the elders. The school invited them to attend the school extracurricular activities. On the first day of June, the teachers and students planted trees and then celebrated the Children's Day. The seventh day of October is the National Teacher's Day. The parents/guardians were invited to watch a soccer game and the cultural performances in which their children were involved. The school presented gifts such as notebooks and sweets to all students on these days (Sukan–125-131).

The head of village and the villagers had a strong cooperative relationship with the school and responded quickly to what was needed. According the school principal, the second floor of the school building almost collapsed and when this was reported to the headnan of village, the villagers started repairs within a month. At the school's request for a toilet to be built for the students, the headman of village agreed for its prompt construction (Duangdy–236-245).

Information about school rules and the consequences of any breach were widely distributed in the village meeting before the opening of the school. The headman of village allowed the school autonomy on matters of regulations and fee collection. If there was an issue, the headman of village would address it later (Duangdy–230-234). In addition, the school planned to report the student learning outcomes, particularly those who achieved poorly, to their parents at the end of each semester.

Duangdy believed that the relationship between the school and the DESB was not close enough because DESB staff rarely visited to provide advice about teaching techniques or school management skills and only arrived once a year to conduct an evaluation. If the school requested the DESB staff to visit, the DESB response was, "No funds" (Duangdy–252-257).

6.3.2 Teachers 'views on parents and students

The teachers said that the parents in this village had positive attitudes toward education and were willing to support their children's schooling. From personal interactions, the teachers understood that some parents were interested in the students' learning problems. Sukan related an anecdote with a grandmother who was concerned about her grandson's learning:

> One grandma wants to know about her grandson's learning performance. She asked me, "Teacher, how is my grandson's learning? Does he do well". "Let me ask you first, Grandma, what does he do at home in the evening? Do you see him reading or doing homework?" "Hmm! I don t want to say", replied Grandma. So I told her, "His learning performance is not so good. Please encourage him to study more at home". "Teacher, I don t know how to encourage. If I speak too much, he gets angry at me", said Grandma. (Sukan–146-155)

Lavan made a point in speaking with parents about their children's learning performances whenever she met them publicly, particularly during traditional festivals. Parents of children who were poor achievers would tell her, "Oh! I'm tired of telling my children. I always tell them to study hard, but they do not obey and always argue. I do not know how to do". Some parents whose children performed well said, "I do not tell them. In the evening, they turn to the book by themselves. They don't wait for the parents' encouragement" (Lavan–16-22). Self reliance is a factor in children's motivation to study more at home and is not solely related to parental encouragement.

No parents visited the teachers to enquire about their child's progress. Lavan thought that the parents were well aware of their children's learning achievment. If she met with parents in the village by chance, often she would be told, "If my child is naughty and doesn't attend to the lesson, punish him! He doesn't listen to me. I allow you to punish him. Most of the parents always tell me this" (Lavan–24-27).

Traditionally, the school loaned textbooks to students from Grades 1–5. However, with greater demand, the school was unable to supply each child with a book and it became the responsibility of the parents. While some bought textbooks for their children, many did not with the result that students had to share the book with others in the class (Duangdy–145-151).

Based on interaction with the parents and the researcher's personal experience in the field, the parents could not envisage an educational future for their children because they had limited knowledge about the education system. Any future study pathways post graduation from upper secondary school had to be explored by the students themselves. Parents would speak to their children saying, "It depends on you. If you don't want to go to school, drop out and go to tend the cattle" (Sukan–8). This indicates that the parents had little hope that education would lead to something. However, if there was a possibility for their children to succeed in education and transform their status quo, they would be enthusiastic to support their children's schooling. Lacking knowledge and clarity on the complexities of the educational pathway has established the dispositions which have formed parental habitus.

Duangdy overheard parents saying that salaries of government employees in Lao PDR were low, and therefore they were not interested in sending their children to school but supported their children to work in Thailand where they could make better incomes. Sukan noted that in this village the parents generally did not support their children's education to any great extent:

> As I see, in the morning parents do not prepare breakfast for their children, don't dress them, don't prepare the schoolbag for them. The parents just say, "Have breakfast, then go to school". But the children have to prepare all by themselves. The parents go out to the garden or the farm early in the morning. For Grade 4-5 students, they can do for themselves, but the younger siblings cannot. Some families do prepare well for their children to go to school. (Sukan–11-25)

Sukan observed that students in the village had little interest in schooling, and Duangdy agreed that students were lazy and did not want to attend school. Duangdy (307) was not satisfied with the students' learning performance as around 60 percent of the students only reached an average level. The children's learning performance could not be determined by their family situation as the principal suggests:

> Some students living with their parents outperform the students living with grandparents. However, some students living with grandparents perform better than those who live with their parents. I still do not understand why. I think it depends upon the students themselves……*[laughing]*…. For example, when comparing two students' learning performances, Miss Bouathong lives with grand-parents and uncle, and she has a high learning performance. This is opposite to Miss Dee, who lives with parents but performs poorly. Another example is that Sengchan lives with her parents, and she studies very well, but Khuanta living with grand-parents performs poorly. I think that the low or high learning performance depends upon individual students´characteristics……*[laughing]*…. (Duangdy–265-276)

It is not always children's innate ability and the parents' level of education that impacts on their learning performance. Duangdy was aware of many cases where the parents were illiterate, and their children performed very poorly. He gave an example of a family where the parents were illiterate, and, as a consequence, their daughter could not read and write fluently in the Lao language. However, in other cases, though the parents could read and write, their children did not perform well. This allowed Duangdy to conclude that it was the children themselves who did not like learning and hence performed poorly.

In fact, people in this village claimed that the 'brain' played an important role in receiving new information, understanding new concepts and processes quickly, and memorising them well. The deputy principal gave a supporting example to show that the students' brain determined how well they could perform at schooling:

> I observed three Grade 1 students who are 6, almost 7, and almost 8 years old. I wrote the numbers from 1 to 10 on the chalkboard and asked who could read. The three students raised their hand. They could do, but those who came through kindergarten could not. Surprisingly, the three students did not go to kindergarten but could read. It is based on their brain. (Sukan)

Sukan firmly believed that innate ability influenced students' learning performance and their family backgrounds were not always determinants of students' achievement at school.

6.3.3 Challenges to school internal efficiency

This school had a good record of enrolment where all school-aged children, apart from the mute boy were enrolled. However, there was some issue with late enrolment because a few children had accompanied their parents to different places. When they returned to the village, they were already over conventional school age. These students had a high risk of dropping out of school.

Student retention was associated with the student absenteeism and dropouts. Duangdy (114-220) stated that often students in this school were absent during October and November because of rice harvesting season. The children went with parents to the rice farm located far from school or on the

other side of a river and were not able to commute to school by themselves. After the rice harvest, most students came to school regularly with only a few of them continuing to be absent.

Absenteeism related mainly to the family situation. Some students were absent because they stayed at the farm with their parents and helped look after the vegetable garden or accompanied parents to market. Other students commuted to school from the farm alone. It was reported to Sukan that one student crossed a river from the farm to school, slipped and became wet but as he had no spare clothes he did not attend school. Sukan was unsure if it was just an excuse.

Another reason for absenteeism was related to the family economic status. Some students were orphaned and lived with aging and poor grandparents. They did not have suitable clothes and schooling materials, so they eventually dropped out even though they may have performed well at school.

> One day I asked him, "Why not come to school?" "I don't have a notebook", he replied. So I talked to the principal and bought a notebook and a pencil for him. In winter some students do not have warm clothes so they do not go to school. (Sukan–185-187)

There was the small percentage of the parents who gave the teacher a reason for their children's absences. The deputy principal said:

> A parent told me, "Teacher, tomorrow I will take my son to have a hair cut in the town. He will miss only the morning class because he will sleep at the farm. He will come back to school in the afternoon. Please allow him to go". (Sukan–206-209)

Larger numbers of absences occurred when there was a traditional festival or a wedding party in the village (Sukan–210). Children truanted without parents' knowledge because they were keen to watch the event.

There were two students in the academic year 2014–15 who left school because of being over age at 14 years old. This is because the students accompanied their parents to Thailand and came back to the village at the age of 8, where they repeated the same grades. Sukan believed that if the parents had stayed in the village, they would not have been enrolled late and not dropped out of school. The withdrawal from school of the two students relates to family poverty in that the family needed to seek employment and hence an income elsewhere.

There were several factors preventing improvement to student learning in this school. One of the main issues related to the promotion strategy where the teachers assisted their students to pass the academic tests to reduce the number of grade repeaters each school year. The students who could

not pass the first test were given a second test, and then a third until all passed and were promoted. Another concern was that teachers rarely developed or updated lesson plans appropriate for their students. The principal's admission was honest:

> I currently do not have a teaching plan. Some teachers, as you know, do not have teaching plans. The problem is related to the teachers, not others. Frankly speaking, I teach without a teaching plan. I plan in my head. I usually do like that. In fact, we should follow each step of a teaching plan, so that the students can learn effectively. (Duangdy – 116-120)

In addition, the teachers did not receive pedagogical training regularly to update their teaching skills and to create teaching aids. Importantly, teachers found it difficult to deviate from familiarity of the conventional teaching style and to adopt new more interactive methodology without regular training. This familiarity had already become the teachers' habitus of teaching in that the teachers apply it automatically. Sukan accepted that the teachers also contributed to students achieving poor standards of learning. During the rice harvesting season, the teachers were busy with their farming work. He confessed:

> Why do some students perform poorly? Because I do not have concentration on teaching. I think about my children and rice farming. One role is a teacher and another role is a farmer. I am also getting older, so all of these make me lose concentration. My children are absent from school to harvest the rice. No one does it. My wife is not healthy enough; she cannot work much. (Sukan– 104-109)

This quotation illustrates the reality and complexities facing the teacher-farmer in a rural area, particularly through October and November during the rice harvesting season. During this period, not only this teacher but also all the others were occupied with their rice harvest.

Students themselves contributed to their underperformance. The teachers blamed their students for not studying hard enough and not doing homework. Sukan estimated that only 20 percent of the students finished their homework. Some students only came for half a day. What their thinking was, was not understood (Sukan–192).

The lack of textbooks also contributed to the low academic performance of the students because they were main resource for students. The school received the textbooks for Grade 1 late into the academic year but there were no textbooks for Grade 2–5 students. The insufficient supply of the teaching aids was also thought to be related to the poor learning performance of the rural students (Duangdy). The principal addressed DESB staff about distributing new equipment for each school and suggested that visual aids for teaching should be allocated for each school equally. Duangdy stated that:

> Yesterday the DESB staff allocated the pictures and posters to kindergarten schools. My school received a few but the schools in the town received many beautiful pictures and posters. I spoke to them, 'please give more to the rural schools. The children in the rural school want to see new things too. Don't just give to the schools in the town'. They replied, 'next time'. That is unequal allocation of materials. The school in the town has many pictures and posters. Therefore, the quality of learning in the rural areas is poor. (Duangdy–289-302)

It was normal for schools in the town to receive more materials than the ones located in rural areas when there was a material shortage. This was because of their closer locations and relationships with the DESB staff and the teachers in the town schools. It was also possible that the DESB staff members who distributed the materials, provided more to the school in his or her home village than other schools. While observing the DESB, the researcher did not see the DESB staff distribute any teaching and learning materials to schools.

6.3.4 Enhancement of school internal efficiency

In this school, the student enrolment was not problematic partially because of the cooperation between the school and the VEDC. Prior to the new school year, the VEDC held a meeting telling parents to enrol their six-year-old children in school. If the teachers identified some who were not registered, they reported those names and parents' names to the VEDC who communicated with the parents.

To improve student retention, the teachers attempted to build intrinsic motivation for their students to realise the value of education for their future. The principal always gave a speech every Monday morning at the school assembly:

> I tell them, "before getting a good job, being police, soldiers, or nurses, everyone has to study. If you have such dream, you have to pay attention to studying. You should have a dream and try to realise your dream. At your parents' and grandparents' time, they all travelled on foot. Now we travel by motorbikes and cars. People who can manufacture cars are educated. We have such good roads because of education. You should be diligent at studying". In the classroom, I also encourage them to study hard. The people who go to work in Thailand and bring some money home also have some level of education. (Duangdy–157-175)

The speech was made not only to encourage the students to go to school regularly but also to remind them about the school rules, mould their behaviours to be acceptable in family and society, and tell them to help their parents with housework. It was a requirement that the school principal had to give a speech to all students at the school assembly. It was unknown how much this practice impacted on the students' learning outcomes.

To reduce the frequency of absences, the teacher kept records of those students who were often absent. If any student was absent for three consecutive days without providing a reason, the teacher

went to meet their parents to seek to understand their problem and offer support. The parents were required to sign a record book to verify the teacher had visited and had communicated a concern. There was no negative feedback for parents or students in being asked to provide a signature. Sukan told me about his visit to the parents and their Grade 4 student who missed classes for four consecutive days. This student underperformed, was over-aged, and eventually dropped out:

> I spoke to them, "It is not good to drop out of school. He is still young. He cannot work to earn money. What is your problem? If you do not have clothes, I will buy for you". We have school fund. They do not face rice scarcity because the rice harvesting had just passed. After a long talk, his mother said to his son, "Ok, if you drop out and I get fined, I will put you in prison. I tried to stop you at the beginning, but you ran to school. But now you want to drop out. I do not allow. Go, go to school. Don't drop out. Why don t you go to tend the cows?" The mother spoke to me, "Do what you want to do with him!" He wants to drop out and hang around the village to have cock fights. I encouraged him to go back to school. (Sukan–49-59)

Some insights can be drawn from this comment. Initially, the parents did not want their son to go to school and there was a village rule that parents had to pay a fine to the VEDC if their children withdrew. Moreover, a rumour circulated in the village that if any school-aged children were not enrolled or dropped out of school, they would be arrested. While the researcher also heard the rumour, there were parents who believed it was true and felt afraid. However, in fact, it was not true, and no one was in jail as a result of this.

Academic performance was a critical issue for this school. One of the DESB's goals as well as being a national goal was to raise student learning performance, especially at the primary level. In response to this goal, and because of the lack of the textbooks, the teachers negotiated with the VEDC to use the school administrative fund to buy 60 textbooks for the students. The VEDC also encouraged the parents to buy textbooks for their children, so some students had their own.

The teachers produced teaching aids such as letter cards, number cards, and drawings for visualising and delivering meaning to the students. In addition, the deputy principal used small stones or chopsticks as teaching aids to demonstrate addition and subtraction of numbers. The teachers gave the students homework and checked it in class the next day with students facing consequences if they did not complete the work but were rewarded if they did to reinforce intrinsic learning behaviours. As additional support, the parents or older siblings were requested to supervise their children's homework with the VEDC reminding parents to do this at village meetings.

Furthermore, the teachers organised an extra class for underperforming students within school time every Thursday afternoon. All the students attended it as a regular class, but the teachers focussed

on the underperforming students. Sukan demonstrated how he particularly helped the poor achievers in his class of Grade 1:

> First, I help them with writing and then counting numbers. I show them one small stone and write number 1, two small stones and write number 2, and so on. I demonstrate visually how to write each number 1, 2, 3, … When adding and subtracting numbers, I use teaching aids, such as small stones, tamarin seeds, or chopsticks to help demonstrate them visually. (Sukan–99-103)

Duangdy always reflected on his teaching techniques. If he felt that his students did not understand, he used another technique in the next class to better deliver the content to his students. Any technique that helped the students understand better was applied in the next class. Sukan also adapted the lesson to suit his students and always changed his teaching techniques if he noticed that the current one was not effective.

The school reported the semester scores of those who underperformed to their parents, identifying the areas where their children were weak, such as math, reading and writing in Lao language, behaviour, personal presentation, singing, or drawing. Each month the teachers recorded their students' scores in a notebook containing academic marks of four monthly tests in each discipline and from the semester exams. At the end of every semester their parents were required to sign the book.

6.4 Summary

The three schools have differences and similarities in terms of school leadership and management, teachers' views on parents and students, challenges to school internal efficiency, and enhancement of school internal efficiency. The three schools are in different geographical locations and have both different and similar problems. School One was in a better location with better infrastructure and facilities than Schools Two and Three. The school had school resources and skilled teachers, and all had greater teaching experience. School Two had an adequate number of teachers but three were probationary teachers and had just started their teaching work, while School Three was in need of more teachers and had two multigrade classes. Similarities among the three schools were limited training opportunities, shortages of textbooks, the use of teacher-centred approaches without the support of teaching plans and teaching aids, and poor school internal efficiency.

The three schools worked toward achieving the DESB's goals for improving enrolment, retention, and academic performance. They also had their own goals for developing the physical assets of the schools. The principal of School One created a learning community for the teachers to continuously improve teaching and learning performance. However, the teachers of School Two and Three did

not have this culture of academic sharing. In addition, the teachers of the three schools did not have teaching plans and teaching aids to effectively support the application of a student-centred approach.

Importantly, the three schools had weak relationships with VEDCs and the parents which needed to be strengthened to support students form their schooling habitus. Schools should inform parents of the school's goals and expected learning standards and invite them to attend school events. Parents and VEDCs need to be made aware of appropriate teaching and learning methodologies as well as school administration issues on a regular basis and the teachers should be attentive to problems occurring at home so that both schools and parents can seek possible solutions together.

Staff at the three schools held negative views on the lack of parental involvement in supporting educational improvement. On the other hand, teachers need to consider the parents' problems in relation to the lack of economic and cultural capital and habitus preferred by the school system. Causes of student absences, dropouts, and underperformance should be investigated rather than blaming parents for their disinterest in education as these causes may relate to class environments, teaching styles, or teacher behaviours which are not appropriate to some students. A precise understanding of family problems is necessary for teachers to supply accurate information for the DESB to be conveyed to the higher authority.

While the three primary schools did not suffer from poor student enrolment numbers, they had both low student retention and modest academic performance. Student absenteeism and dropouts were attributed to their family, school, and their own characteristics. Some children were required to be engaged in housework, farming, and earning an income. The embedded school culture meant that some students in School One were afraid of punishment when they were unable to finish homework, and some students were ashamed when they paid school fees late. Some students dropped out after prolonged illnesses even though their parents encouraged and supported them well. In School Two and Three, student truancy and dropouts because of age was prevalent.

The three schools worked to enhance school internal efficiency by focussing on improving statistics and retention rates rather than student learning. One strategy was to help students to progress through the school system albeit through a dubious assessment process. This strategy could delay student academic performance and hinder them from meeting the academic requirements prescribed in the curriculum. The strategy to improve retention rate and hence decrease the dropout rate of students involved visits to families whose children were absent for three consecutive days. This

appeared to be exercising political power over parents and students rather than supporting intrinsic motivation about the value of education.

Chapter 7
DISTRICT EDUCATION AND SPORTS BUREAU
(DESB)

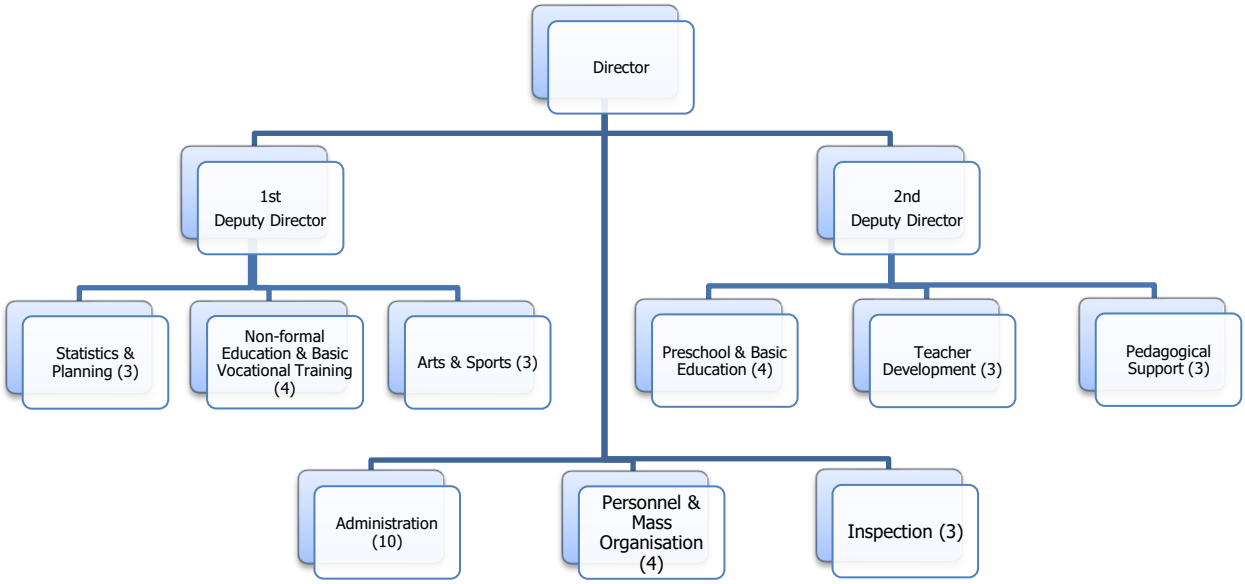
This chapter presents an analysis of data collected from the DESB and is discussed in eight sections. The first and second sections consider key DESB staff perceptions around educational opportunities, challenges and leadership in the DESB. The third, fourth, and fifth sections examine the challenges associated with social relations, resources, and internal efficiency. The sixth and seventh sections relate to strategies to improve internal efficiency and teaching and learning quality while the last section is a summary of the chapter.

At the time of this study, the DESB administration occupied two buildings: one new and one old. The new building had five rooms accommodating the director, two deputy directors, and five units; four units shared a large room. The old building had two large rooms, one shared by four units, and the other was used for meetings. There were desk computers for each unit, a telephone, and two televisions in the large room of each building. Both buildings had electricity and a water supply but had no internet connection, photocopier, or scanner.

In total there were 40 staff, of whom 13 were female, working in the DESB. Their ages ranged from 22 to over 50 years with most aged between 45 and 55 years. Many of the staff had been born and had grown up in the rural areas of the researched district. Some were former teachers who had years of teaching experience in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. For instance, the current director had been a teacher in both lower and upper secondary schools in the district. The first deputy director had been a maths teacher at a lower secondary school, and the second deputy director used to teach history at an upper secondary school in this district. Teachers were appointed to work in the DESB after several years of teaching. A staff transfer occurred when there was a vacancy due to a staff retirement from a position at the DESB or when DESB staff moved to work in the District Governance Office. At the time of this fieldwork, even though some were working in the DESB, located in the centre of the district, they still lived in rural villages, the furthest distance being 20 kilometres away, and commuted by motorbike.

Figure 7.1 on the next page depicts the organisational structure of the DESB. There were nine administrative units in the DESB and numbers in brackets refer to the number of staff in each of the units.

Figure 7.1: Organisational structure of the DESB



Note: The organisational structure drawn was based on the interview with the director.

The qualifications held by DESB staff were at least a diploma. Some had gained diplomas or advanced diplomas at Teacher Training College in the province, while others had graduated with bachelor degrees from a university in the country. Only the director held a master's degree from a university in Vietnam majoring in educational management and administration. The other staff specialised in different pedagogic disciplines such as maths, physics, history, chemistry, and Lao language. Their current work in the DESB was different from what they had studied at their tertiary education institution.

A key DESB staff member, Nilandon, explained that about 90 percent of the DESB staff were also engaged in rice farming. Therefore, they were not concerned about late payments or low salaries because they could produce rice by themselves. Food supplies could be collected from ponds, swamps, rivers and rice fields. During a rice harvesting season,

> the staff have to manage time for going to the farm and coming to the office. It is necessary to do so. In the afternoon at 4.00 p.m., they rush out to sheave rice in the farms…*[laughing].* (Nilandon–226)

The DESB were responsible for educational improvement in a wide range of educational institutions. It took full responsibility for improvement of preschool, primary school, and non-formal education, and partial responsibilities for secondary and upper secondary education. Staff roles included implementing strategies to increase the enrolment rate and decrease the dropout rate. They were

also accountable to submit requests to the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) for teacher allocations, to collect statistics of teachers and students, to pay teachers' salaries, to maintain school physical facilities, and the setting up classrooms (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). To reiterate, the focus of this study is on how the DESB works to improve primary education in the district. Therefore, the following sections discuss the data analysis related to primary education in the district.

7.1 Perceptions of educational opportunities and challenges

Two key DESB staff members, Salong and Pasa, provided data on what they perceived as educational opportunities and challenges. They expressed the view that every child in the district had sufficient opportunity to access education because there was a school in every village, offering schooling to at least primary Grades 1–3. Salong (99–102) voiced his opinion, "Hmmm! … opportunity to access primary education for all children in the district is considered sufficient and easily accessible because every village in the district has a primary school. There are no white villages, meaning villages without schools". In the district, Pasa added,

> the primary school is in every village, or at least an incomplete primary school. Therefore, about the opportunity, I think nearly 100 percent because the net enrolment rate of 6 to 10 years old in most villages is 100 percent. I don't know if they have an opportunity or not. (Pasa–8-10)

DESB's understanding of the term 'an educational opportunity' was represented as the availability of primary schools in every village.

This position on educational opportunity has been a long-held view of the DESB and widely circulated among schools. While the DESB staff blame parents and children for being disinterested in education, the availability of a school building and teachers in every village is not all that is needed for valuable educational opportunities. It would be prudent if the key DESB staff would extend their understanding to learn the issues parents encounter with their involvement in the school system and what their expectations are in sending their children to school.

Educational challenges, according to Salong, related to teachers' academic qualifications, teachers' salary, and parental involvement. Salong (56-63) suggested that teachers who have completed lower secondary school Grade 2 or 3 and have had some pedagogical training, have lesser qualifications and insufficient academic knowledge. Linking with Bourdieusian concepts, this implies they possess limited cultural capital for effective teaching. Salong believed that teachers' cultural capital directly and largely influenced students' cultural capital. Salong was concerned about teachers' salaries claiming that "the salaries do not meet teachers' needs. It is discouraging. No one is willing and

devoted to working". This alludes to the idea that if teachers are paid more, they would be more proactive in teaching as they would feel their salaries justify their hard work. This did not mean that the teachers encounter financial difficulties but that the teachers need a higher salary to be able to buy items to cover career and living expenses. Limited parental involvement is also seen as a challenge and Salong blamed parents for not being cooperative. He claimed that when teachers visit parents of children not at school, parents said, "Oh! Teacher! I give up. My child does not listen to me". Salong also described children's behaviours claiming that in the evening, they do not study but hang around in the village. This is consistent with the concept of habitus formed through children's interactions with the world around them. The ways parents and neighbours think about, talk about, and act towards education directly shape the children's dispositions.

Pasa believed some families did not create opportunities for their children to go to school. In the morning, for example, the parents assigned work to their children, "You, go to tend the cows, and you, look after your younger sibling. We will go to the farm." Pasa claimed that parents were disinterested in their child's education. Although the school was located only 100 metres from the village, there were many children out of school and some had never been enrolled, while others had dropped out after enrolment. They were only interested in rice farming as a daily livelihood–from the start of May/June some families moved out to the farm, taking all the young children, their necessary belongings and cattle and remained there until November when rice harvesting was over. The parents had no time to deliver or pick children up from school nor did they even wait for their children to sit for examinations. As the parents were farmers, they paid attention to rice farming, raising poultry and cattle rather than their children's education.

Pasa's also believed that educational opportunity correlated to having a school in a village. However, he overlooked the practical reasons of why children did not want to go to school or why parents did not send their children to school. Instead, he placed blamed on the family for not using the educational opportunity available to them. The culture of blaming the family and the world around them shaped the way Pasa viewed parents and their children with the decisions made around schooling. The analysis also revealed Pasa lacked important knowledge in analysing and understanding the educational situation in the local setting.

7.2 Leadership in the DESB

Being responsible for primary education development in the district, the DESB supported every school to work toward meeting three essential criteria–improvement of teaching and learning quality, strategies for drug use prevention endemic in schools, and the creation of green schools. To enhance

enrolment, reduce repetition and the dropout rate, and importantly improve the academic performance of students, teachers were advised to develop teaching plans and produce appropriate teaching aids. As drug use was endemic in rural villages, schools were warned to protect students from becoming victim to substance abuse. Strategies included teacher observations of student behaviours and targeted urine testing by DESB staff visiting schools. Green environments were encouraged with schools expected to grow plants and keep school grounds clean.

The specific goals of primary education improvement in this district included increasing the net enrolment rate and decreasing repetition and dropout rates in order to contribute to achieving the national targets (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). By 2020, both repetition and dropout rates of primary school students in this district are expected to go down to one percent (Pasa–46). To achieve this, the DESB has set different targets for each school based on their current position and capacity, to contribute to reaching the district targets. Those schools that are socio-educationally advantaged are expected to achieve higher levels, while the disadvantaged schools can achieve lower. But the average rate of all schools in the district must meet the projected PESS outcomes (Nilandon–332-339).

The DESB's plan was adopted from the PESS's annual plan and adjusted to suit the socio-economic environments of the district and the situation in each school. The DESB's plan consisted of establishing more classrooms in some schools to reduce multigrade classes; improving enrolment levels, decreasing grade repetition and dropout rates of students; ensuring gender equality in educational access; allocating probationary teachers to certain schools; and sending teachers to expand their professional skills at the Teacher Training College. The schools were involved in formulating annual plans because components of the DESB's plan were drawn from the plans developed by schools, such as extending school buildings, fencing school grounds, growing trees, and constructing tables and benches (Nilandon–343).

The DESB shared goals and plans with school principals in a meeting at the DESB and they, in turn, shared the information with Village Education Development Committees (VEDC) who helped with encouraging parents/guardians to enrol their children in school and support them. In some areas where there were serious problems, the DESB convened a special meeting for school principals and the VEDC to discuss strategies to have all primary school-aged children in school and to decrease the number of students who dropped out. This signified a concerted attempt by the DESB to mobilise the network of connections with schools and VEDCs to increase the volume of social capital.

Follow-up meetings were organised by the DESB to reflect on the work accomplished and to create new plans of action for uncompleted tasks. Some goals that were unable to be achieved in the Semester 1 or 2 were implemented in the following semester. These interventions by the DESB were organised to propel underachieving schools to address their problems (Nilandon–348).

Decision making in the DESB was top-down. Even though every staff member was encouraged to participate in discussions in a meeting, a final decision was eventually made by the head of the DESB alone and was not able to be appealed regardless of other opinions. Chantha complained:

> If we propose some ideas in the meeting, he rejects right away. He does not care about any one. His leadership is not good, and he is not good at managing work as well. He only solves immediate problems, but he does not have plans for what to do next. (Chantha–217)

'Decision-making goes down while information goes up' represents political culture in Lao PDR. Exercising power in decision-making is a characteristic of bureaucracy and is politically accepted for enacting without question (Stuart-fox, 2006). However, Chantha contended, "It is right you are a boss, but it would be better to have a discussion". It was clear that Chantha wanted to see trust, respect and collective decision-making happening by staff in the DESB.

The DESB rewarded schools that had surpassed others in terms of improving students' enrolment, retention and academic performance. Once school evaluations had been conducted, the results were announced at a meeting attended by all DESB staff and school principals. Letters of recognition and prize money were awarded to the schools and the best students in the district received a special letter of recognition issued by the district governor.

7.3 Social relations challenges

The aspect of social relations is one of several determinants that impacts on the progress of education improvement. In this study, social relations refer to the social network of DESB staff members, schools and villages. The DESB staff social network can be regarded as 'internal relations' in reference to the unity, collegiality, and connection among staff within the department, which becomes its cultural heritage, and is viewed as the DESB's habitus. The atmosphere in the DESB was observed to be family-like with the staff using the words 'dad, brother, sister, son, and daughter' to name others or themselves in interpersonal conversations. It is common to call someone who has the similar age to their family members with these titles in public and workplace to show respect and reflect their close relationships. In the interviews, the key staff confirmed that all staff within the DESB had good unity and collegiality. Salong claimed that the DESB's prominent characteristics

were friendliness and solidarity, and Nilandon supported this view suggesting there was no boss, no followers; all were the same.

Careful observation identified that the internal relationships were vertically, but not horizontally, tight. The vertical relationship revealed that the staff of all ages and positions interacted well with each other. However, in the horizontal relationship, there was a conflict amongst some key DESB staff because they had divergent ideas in decision making. Senior staff members were dissatisfied that only the person at the top made decisions without consultation, upsetting others in the DESB. This conflict impacted individual relationships, internal unity, and eventually work execution in the DESB. Senior staff could consider creating a culture of sharing knowledge and experience through interactions and discussions leading to an accumulation of other capital. This culture could bring about a positive change in internal unity and thus, work performance.

External relations refer to the DESB's network of connections that engage with schools, villages, and some international projects to improve primary education in the district. The network, established and maintained by these stakeholders is viewed as social capital. The social capital established between the DESB staff and school principals is well maintained through monthly meetings at the DESB. However, DESB staff failed to create opportunities to form social networks with themselves and teacher, to explore teacher issues and provide practical advice and encouragement. It is unfortunate that DESB staff rarely visited schools to support teachers and activate social capital.

The relationship between DESB staff and VEDCs and parents was insignificant. The social capital owned by the DESB staff was not shared with these stakeholders. According to Pasa, the DESB did not communicate directly with VEDCs and parents because villages were not under DESB's governance. A key DESB staff member stated:

> About the VEDCs, so far they have not worked closely with the DESB; they work under supervision of the district governance office. We do not have much power to advise them. We only ask schools to communicate with them. Villages are governed by the district governance office, so we can only coordinate with the deputy district governor who assigned the district political party committee to work closely with local villages. The district political party committee speaks to village heads or VEDCs about educational affairs. (Pasa–164)

The DESB has benefitted from the support of international projects. These projects have ensured construction of primary school buildings for some rural villages and provided training programs for DESB staff, teachers and heads of VEDCs. The projects have focused on improving teaching and learning quality, school management and administration, planning, and report writing. One project, the Community Initiative for Education Development II (CIED II), provided training courses on

teaching methods. The project first trained the administrative staff and then teachers on how to produce and use teaching aids (Nilandon–96).

Another was a Norwegian project providing clothing and stationery for primary school students, constructing school buildings for some poor villages, and offering scholarships for two lower secondary school graduates to study at Teacher Training College (Nilandon–303). The Norwegian project also provided information on human trafficking and victimisation, being abused or working as slaves in Thailand (Nilandon–296). However, none of these projects were permanent in the area, and not all schools and villages benefitted from these projects.

7.4 Resourcing constraints

The resources in this study refer to human, finance, curricular materials, and time. The way the DESB manages its responsibilities for distribution and use of these resources has had a significant impact on educational improvement across the system. All DESB staff and primary school teachers are the main resource for achieving successful outcomes in primary educational improvement. The allocation of the DESB staff to management positions is generally determined by qualification and seniority in work experience, but while they are former teachers, they have not been trained to work as educational leaders and managers in the DESB. Drawing on Bourdieusian theory, students perform well in the schooling field when possessing cultural capital. Likewise, within the DESB field, the staff need to have cultural capital to execute their work effectively. In this case, cultural capital refers to the knowledge necessary for analysing, planning, budgeting, implementing, evaluating, and interpreting situations. However, the data analysis has shown that the DESB staff lacked this form of capital, and mainly followed mandates rather than taking initiative to enhance their own and teachers' work performances in the district.

In addition to cultural capital, the DESB staff required economic capital to support the implementation of education development programs. The DESB received a fund of about fifty million kip per school year from the government for the administrative work in the DESB and to carry out educational activities at schools (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). This fund does not include salaries, computer maintenance and replacements, but Nilandon indicated that some of the administrative expenditure was spent on computer equipment such as a printer, toners, paper, etc. The fund was also used for materials needed for meetings such as stationery and other necessities (Inpon, 153-155). In addition, the fund was intended to support DESB staff to visit schools and attend meetings in the PESS or at other DESBs, and was used for transportation, daily meal allowances, and accommodation. A key DESB staff member said,

> The important things are papers, pencils, etc. We sometimes have to borrow some from shops. When we have money, we pay the debt and then borrow and borrow again. Some years, the staff went out on work at schools without financial support; they only got money for fuel. We went to attend meetings somewhere; we only got bus fares. (Nilandon)

It was clear the DESB often encountered shortages of funds or economic capital to execute office work and support educational activities at schools. In addition, the volume of economic capital had already been further reduced because of inappropriate use. Chantha pointed out that while this fund allocation was not small and was used mainly for administrative and academic work, it had the capacity to be spent in a range of other areas if used wisely and appropriately.

Curricular materials such as chalkboards, textbooks, teacher guides, notebooks, and other stationery are necessary for supporting teaching and learning activities. Textbooks and teacher guides are sent directly by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in the beginning of each school year and chalkboards and other stationery are supplied by the Provincial Education and Sports Service. Based on the researcher's observations at schools and figures provided in an interview with a key staff member, there were not sufficient textbooks for every student across the district and in addition, teacher guides for some subjects were not supplied. This situation was the result of an inefficient distribution by the MoES.

It was observed that most DESB staff did not use time effectively. There appeared to be considerable free time in which many non-work-related activities were conducted in work hours. Staff who were responsible for statistics, however, were always dynamic and hardworking, while staff in charge of distributing teaching and learning materials to schools were only diligent at the beginning of the school year. One key DESB staff member claimed that in fact, they could use their initiative, find work and become productive if they wanted to, but generally they waited for directions from a higher authority and worked accordingly.

7.5 Challenges to internal efficiency

Although the enrolment rate of 6–10 year-old students in the district was 98.12 percent as of school year 2014–15 (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015), some primary school-aged children were not enrolled in school. The key DESB staff provided some explanations for those not enrolled. One of the most obvious was related to family poverty where parents had no alternative but to stay on the farm and send their children to school only after the completion of rice harvesting about two or three months later. Some farms were about 10 kilometres away from home. Nilandon said that "until now it is difficult to solve. The children drop out, are re-enrolled and then drop out again". Some

children accompanied their parents when they went to work in Thailand, and not sent to school. When they returned they were already over-aged, so there was no desire to go. Children with disabilities in the district were not sent to school either, but they accounted for only a fraction of the rate. Generally, the connection to family economic capital is the key factor for parents choosing to send their children to the farm rather than sending them to school.

7.5.1 Academic underperformance and grade repetition

Key DESB staff heard parents complaining that primary school graduates were unable to read the Lao language and perform the four basic mathematical functions effectively. Indeed, the agenda at principals' monthly meetings, regularly raised discussions about students' underachievement. DESB staff submitted several factors which they felt influenced students' learning performance, and included the students themselves, their parents, schools, and the system. Each of these is discussed below.

In relation to students' behaviours, Nilandon blamed some students for their disinterest in schooling citing children of most families did not do homework (Salong–62). Additionally, some students only attended classes they liked, preferring to truant during school time (Pasa–92). Moreover, in the villages, some Grades 4 and 5 students were frequently absent, working in the sugar cane plantations and catching cicadas for extra income. Students who were often absent were likely to lose interest in schooling and as a result, underperform academically (Pasa – 96). The home environments shaped students' habitus, but in these cases their habitus was not relevant the schools' requirements. In fact, the DESB staff were all too aware of the life style of rural parents as most of themselves came from rural areas. What they were not mindful of was that parents' modes of living and thinking had influenced the children's behaviours which was interpreted by the DESB as a disinterest in schooling.

Another factor discovered linked student underachievement with limited parental involvement in their children's schooling activities. Studies show that parental involvement contributes to students' learning achievement (Aluede & Ojugo, 2016; Castro et al., 2015). In this study, there was a strong connection between the involvement of parents in their children's learning generating social capital. However, the key DESB staff blamed parents for not being concerned about their children's schooling but overlooked or did not understand problems facing the parents. Nilandon felt that parents did not encourage or create opportunities for their children to study at home and did not care whether their children were good or bad at learning (Nilandon–93). He claimed that they often required their children to do housework and allowed them to watch too much television. These home practices are

enacted through parental habitus and have been developed by parents taking education for granted, thus forming their children's habitus. Pasa speculated that the parents disregarded the fact that their children missed school to harvest sugar cane or hunt for cicadas. Yet because of poverty, parents prioritised family livelihood over their children's education as they had little hope for a return on their investment in education. Some rural parents had never been to school, and most had only a primary education qualification. They did not possess the knowledge to enable them to know how to motivate and help their children negotiate their position in the educational field. It can be concluded that limited parental involvement in this study was a result of the limitations of family economic and cultural capital which would allow parents to enter social networks and secure the required social capital.

The third factor regarding poor learning performance, related to schools and focused on teachers' responsibilities of adapting their teaching to improve students' learning outcomes. Khamkon claimed, "I cannot say that teachers do well at school", and according to Inpon's, "Some teachers demotivate students because they do not teach attentively. They do not have teaching techniques to attract their students to lessons". This meant that they did not work hard enough or attempt to make changes in their school. They just wanted to get their teaching job done each day. Nilandon maintained that teachers failed to study the lessons in depth and were not active enough. Chantha's opinion was that most teachers in the district had no teaching plans, had not prepared diligently before classes and only performed well when DESB staff were present. After the DESB staff left, the standard of teaching in the school returned to its default position. Chantha said, "It is really true, like a vegetable, we have to give it water every day. If we do not do that for a day, it withers" (Chantha–46). To improve teaching quality, ongoing teacher training is necessary. Teachers who are constantly trained in the way the system requires will gradually change their existing behaviours and internalise new behaviours as their cultural capital and habitus of teaching practice.

The last but crucial factor influencing student achievement is centred around the educational system. The MoES has responsibility for policy development, academia and pedagogical training, curricula and resource development, salaries, school funds and infrastructure, all of which relate to the large volume of economic capital possessed by the system. However, Salong indicated that some teachers' academic knowledge was poor and that all primary schools in the district lacked basic teaching and learning materials. He insisted that the DESB had not received sufficient textbooks and resources for all primary schools. Pasa believed that the lack of teacher guides and teaching aids as well as basic infrastructure and amenities could be a contributor to student underperformance. Because of a shortage of teachers, many schools provided multigrade classes and although the numbers of

students in each grade were small, teachers needed special techniques to deal with different students in different grades. Teachers had to prepare teaching plans separately for different grades (Nilandon–80). Teachers of multigrade classes seldom had training to develop their teaching methodologies on a regular basis. Indeed, it was overwhelming for teachers of multigrade classes.

In effect, academic underperformance could be linked to the impact of many factors from the local village up to bureaucratic levels of the education system. Identified factors include student habitus, parents' economic and cultural capital, school habitus, and system economic capital.

7.5.2 High student dropout

In the school year 2014–15, the dropout rate of Grades 1–5 students was 5.9 percent in the researched district (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). In determining the causes, one key DESB staff member responded, "Hmmm! It is difficult to tell what exactly they are". Nonetheless, from the interviews with them, the researcher has classified the causes for student dropout into four themes pertaining to–the students themselves, the family situation, the school environment, and opportunities for higher education and job recruitment. Each of these is discussed in more detail.

According to the key DESB staff members, the first reason why students drop out was related to the students themselves. Pasa blamed them for not being interested in schooling. The parents failed to enrol their children to school, encourage them or support them with the result that after a month or two the children did not want to go to school again. Pasa visited many villages where parents placed blame on their children for non-attendance but appeared to want them at school, telling him, 'If you can encourage them, please do.' Pasa maintained that when teachers talked to parents about sending their children to school, the teachers also received the same message from the parents. Teachers were told, 'I give up pushing my children. If you can, please come and take them to school. I am tired of encouraging them, but they do not go'. Nilandon, another DESB staff member, confirmed that some students for no other reasons were just not interested in schooling. As a result, they achieved little, repeated the same grade, and were older than others in the class, eventually dropping out because they were ashamed. It was mainly Grade 2 and 3 students who dropped out of school.

Another cause of student dropout was partially rooted in their family's economic situation. Parents needed their children to help with housework or farm work or to mind younger siblings. Others took their children away from school for two to three days at a time to work in sugar cane and eucalyptus plantations. Khamkon narrated a story from a few years earlier, where a truck came from the southern province to pick up the villagers to pick coffee on the southern plantations. The children

accompanied their parents because wages for the children and adults were the same. Some also went with their parents to work in Thailand because no one was able to look after them at home. Other parents sent their children aged eleven or twelve, to work in Thailand. Nilandon believed that a child at this age would not have made a personal decision to leave but it would have been more likely through their parents' encouragement and that they were able to secure a border pass for them. Khamkon also knew of some Grade 5 students in rural villages, and though over aged ten, carried illegal border passes showing ages of up to 18, so they could work in Thailand. Khamkon recognised that poor families with many children could not financially support everyone's schooling. These families were more likely to withdraw their children from the education system and send them to work in Thailand.

School environments including school buildings and facilities, were also thought to contribute to the student dropout. Pasa said that if the school buildings were beautiful, clean and equipped with toilets, students might be attracted to attend. Another aspect related to extracurricular activities, which if provided every day and were enjoyable, would provide incentive for students to stay rather than to go home to collect water or help parents harvest rice. Sports events and dancing practices could make school even more attractive and reduce the dropout rate. The third contributing factor related to the teaching quality. Pasa claimed that if teaching was not interesting or teachers became angry in classes, students were not inclined to attend. Nilandon suggested that teachers needed to become more proactive, be devoted to teaching and children, be responsible and have a professional work ethic. Teachers did not motivate their students because they only focused on academic work believing that was their sole responsibility. Inspiring and encouraging students was left to the school principal at a school assembly every week. The last contribution to the dropout rate concerned the teacher attendance which could be unreliable. Teachers were often away from classes to attend traditional ceremonies in villages and schools closed when there were festivals, weddings, and ritual and cultural activities, to which teachers were invited. Teachers being late for classes, early leave, and absenteeism–today absent, tomorrow busy, next day holiday–could lead to the student dropping out. According to Nilandon:

> If teachers are accountable and care about student learning, they can go to attend the ceremony at the lunch break, as the DESB advises. But they do not listen; they attend it in the early morning to have fresh food and stay there the whole day. This is only minor but can contribute to the rate of student dropouts. (Nilandon–202)

Schools themselves can contribute to the level of student dropouts in two ways. The first relates to the fact that schools lack financial capital to create the environments and the capability to organise extracurricular activities to attract their students to come to school. The second contribution is

associated with teachers' absenteeism and their behaviours towards students in classes. It can be concluded therefore, that the schools' financial capital and teachers' behaviours impact on the student dropout rate.

Another cause of students choosing not to continue with education is associated with the limited opportunity of entering tertiary education and recruitment fields after completing upper secondary school. Khamkon claimed opportunities for tertiary education were very limited for rural students, especially those who were poor. Economic capital was a necessity to enter these last two fields unless the student's social network included someone powerful enough working in the desired organisation (Khamkon–70). In the district, most parents were disheartened by the amount of economic capital required to be invested in their children's general education. Moreover, after finishing upper secondary school, they had no foresight or experience in making strategic decisions for their children's educational pathways (Salong –222). Winning government scholarships was the only way for rural students to access the higher education field. The number of the scholarships was limited, and hypothetically were awarded to the highest academic achievers. However, students who had wealthier parents or parents in kinship relations with scholarship decision makers had better opportunities to win scholarships than others.

For rural parents, further study leading to a qualification was the only reason for sending their children to school as they were aware that the employment could take their children away from working hard on the farm and lift them and other family members out of the cycle of poverty. Rural parents believed that being employed in cities meant the capacity to earn more money, have a better life, and gain greater respect than working on the farm. Therefore, rural parents wanted their children to be handed the opportunity to go to tertiary education and gain government employment.

Yet, some students who completed Teacher Training College and returned home could not find work in schools (Khamkon–70). During a probationary period, some worked without salaries for more than three years while waiting to be recruited (Salong–231). According to the recruitment policy, probationary staff were required to work for two years without a salary before being considered for recruitment. However, Chantha commented that there were too many probationary teachers in the district but only a few new teacher quotas each year, and yet the DESB had accepted them. According to the DESB report, there were 106 probationary teachers but only five recruitment quotas in 2015 (District Education and Sports Bureau 2015). Just as in winning a scholarship, those who possessed social and economic capital had greater opportunity to be recruited than others and could choose where to work. The rest had to wait without knowing when or if they would be recruited.

Limited chances of recruitment led some parents to ask, "What is studying for? We already have the prime minister, provincial governors, district governors, soldiers, police, teachers, etc." (Nilandon–129). Salong sometimes overheard parents complaining, "Oh! A district governor position is not vacant; neither is a provincial governor position". This did not mean that parents wanted their children to be a district or provincial governor. It simply described the scarcity of vacancies in employment fields available for those who lacked economic capital and social capital (kinship relationship) in the district and province.

7.5.3 Fabrication of information

In the interview with the key DESB staff members, two mentioned the practice of fabricating data for reports. Nilandon revealed that when directed to increase an enrolment rate in his school, one school principal invented student enrolment statistics. In his report to the DESB, the enrolment rate in his school reached 100 percent in that school year. In a DESB meeting with principals, everyone applauded his effort and success, but a later investigation revealed the exact enrolment rate was only 60 percent. Another school principal reported that his school had no students drop out when in fact, there were some, but they were reported as 'absentees'. Principals behave like this to avoid being assessed as weak school leaders (Nilandon–157).

School statistics provided by school principals were sometimes unreliable. The DESB acknowledged and praised those schools which did well, but at the same time gave critical feedback to those that underperformed. School principals were pressured into increasing the enrolment rate which placed them in a difficult situation and forced them to fabricate statistics. This indicates that the DESB exercised too much power over schools to obtain the required results without understanding the real problems and situations.

There have been occasions when the DESB reporting to the PESS have also contained engineered results. This is the implication when Khamkon says, "…about the quality it is not satisfactory; but about the educational indicators, it depends on each DESB's techniques". Manipulated information on school achievement is reported to the PESS by the DESB to statistically achieve the targets. Salong also makes this inference when he says, "It is impossible to be strict about statistics because our goal is to have all students complete primary schooling". Fabrication results from the policy demands and pressure by the DESB. To provide accountability, it appears that schools focus on the need for good statistics rather than what students really learn at school.

7.6 Improvement of internal efficiency

In an effort to improve the internal efficiency of schooling, the DESB developed strategic plans and communicated them to schools in conjunction with VEDCs. To improve the enrolment rate, prior to the commencement of a school year, the headmen of villages organised a meeting to induce parents to enrol their school-aged children in school. Teachers collected names and parents' contact details of children aged from one to ten in the village. The teachers reported the names of those not enrolled but eligible to be in school to the headmen of villages who then visited those families to convince them to send their children to school.

Key DESB staff recognised the importance of strengthening relationships with schools as their scheduling included visits to disadvantaged schools and schools with problems twice a year, each semester. However, their schedule had been nullified for the last three years because of limited economic capital. In these circumstances, the DESB relied on reports from the school principals. If any schools appeared to have significantly serious problems, the DESB director appointed staff with appropriate responsibility, usually from the Pre-school and Basic Education Unit, to identify problems and provide suggestions for those schools. The DESB also coordinated with the deputy district governor who advised the Political Party Committee working with headmen of the villages to advocate for community and parental involvement to increase students' enrolment, retention and academic performance (Khamkon–112).

Recognising students' economic capital, the DESB provided some opportunities for children of poor families who wished to attend school. If the headman of the village confirmed the status of these families, the children were not required to pay for items such as documents, photography, certificates, and school administration fees. The DESB also allowed the schools to accept late enrolments and long absences during the rice harvesting season. Only schools identified as having a low enrolment and high dropout rate were provided this kind of an opportunity (Pasa–1).

To decrease the absenteeism rate, the homeroom teacher visited parents or guardians when students were absent for three consecutive days. After three teacher's visits, with no attendance, the principal and the headman of village met with the parents. At every visit, the parent or guardian was required to sign a record book as documented evidence.

The DESB encouraged all primary schools to implement the 'progressive promotion policy', introduced by the MoES and aimed at reducing the number of repeaters in school. Teachers were required to organise extra classes for low achievers in order to help them catch up academically with

their peers. This did not mean that anyone attending the extra classes could automatically be promoted. They had to pass academic tests; otherwise, they repeated the same grade. In the extra classes, students' achievement was measured by the average score of a test, classwork, homework plus other personal skills in extra-curricular activities such as sports and art performance. Some students might not have had good academic skills but excelled at sports or other extra-curricular activities, so they could be promoted.

The DESB and schools were aware that the students who repeated the same grade were likely to drop out of school. One strategy was to implement the progressive promotion policy, and another was to improve school environments attracting students to come to school. The school environment refers to the domains both inside and outside the classroom. The domain inside is related to teacher behaviour while outside, it is associated with extracurricular activities. Pasa said:

> If teaching is not effective or teachers often get angry in classes, students don't want to attend. If the school environment is attractive with extra-curricular activities and students have fun every day, they don't want to go home to collect water or help their parents harvest rice. (Pasa–50)

The DESB encouraged all classroom teachers to build good relationships with their students and behave professionally. In addition, the DESB advised every primary school to organise extracurricular activities for their students and to encouraged them not to miss classes.

The last strategy involved the commitment of community leaders and parents. For example, at the time of data collection, one rural school had around 40 students drop out in the first three months of Semester 1 (September to November 2015). Nilandon suggested that community leaders including the political party committee working in the village, the village political party secretary, and the headman of village were to blame for their ineffectiveness in preventing this problem from happening. The concerned DESB staff went to meet the various parties and all villagers, to discuss ways of bringing these students back to school and to be able to retain them in classes.

7.7 Improvement of teaching and learning quality

The teaching and learning activity is a process of cultivating knowledge, skills, and perspectives in students' dispositions which then shape their habitus. However, the DESB staff were aware that the teaching and learning performance in the district was not satisfactory, causing students' underperformance. Poor learning outcomes continued challenging the key DESB staff who guided schools on the way to meet the national targets. The strategies the DESB used to improve teaching

and learning performance included coaching classroom instruction, encouraging teachers to develop themselves professionally, and advising the schools to work with the VEDC and parents.

The teaching approach that the DESB introduced to every school in the district was 'student-centred'. To apply this approach effectively, the DESB required classroom teachers to develop teaching plans and produce teaching aids. The MoES provided the manual for developing teaching plans and directions on how to teach students and the DESB required teachers to develop teaching plans with activities and questions that suited the levels of individual students. For instance, low performers were supported with clearer and less complex questioning.

Together with developing the teaching plan, teachers were also required to produce teaching aids for supporting classroom instructions. It was suggested that if students could use all their senses in learning they could understand and remember lessons more easily (Pasa–82). The DESB pedagogical advisers also appointed deputy principals as pedagogical advisers to their schools and instructed them to train their colleagues, guide them to develop teaching plans, and observe and give feedback to the teachers. Some schools had more than one pedagogical adviser, each responsible for different disciplines.

Another technique was to arrange high achieving students to sit with those who underperform so they could assist their peers with learning in class (Nilandon–84). During group work, good students became the teacher's teaching assistants (Nilandon–125). This phenomenon created opportunities for the students to form networks increasing the size of their social capital. Everyone possessing sizeable social capital receives a range of benefits in the form of learning, social, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership skills.

The DESB also considered the importance of educators' professional development for improving the teaching and learning quality in the district. However, opportunities for attending formal training programs were very limited because of insufficient economic capital. Some had opportunities to attend intensive courses, training programs, and monthly meetings. The researcher viewed intensive courses, training programs, and monthly meetings as social spaces for attendees to come into contact and establish social capital through which cultural capital accumulated. Every year, the DESB sent 15 to 20 teachers and DESB staff to Teacher Training College for intensive training during the vacation period from June to August (Nilandon–272). Within the DESB, heads or deputy heads of units had priority to take these courses. Only a few teachers had the opportunity to attend training programs organised by some national and international project initiatives. In the year of this study, the Community Initiative for Education Development Programme (CIED II) organised training

programs for the DESB pedagogical advisers, and 20 principals with 20 heads of the VEDCs from the same villages (Pasa–119). Nilandon said that the monthly meeting was indirect professional development where principals or deputy principals received feedback and advice and have discussions and exchanges of knowledge and experiences with other attendees. In the meeting, the high performing schools demonstrated their effective strategies so that other school principals could learn and take these back to their own schools (Khamkon–164).

The DESB recognised the advantage of social network mobilisation and collaboration among local stakeholders. Therefore, the DESB advised the schools to work with the VEDCs to encourage parents to create a supportive environment for their children to study at home and supervise their children's homework. The schools were advised to report learning results of poor performing students to the headman of village who then discussed them with the students' parents. The report informed the parents of the academic disciplines where their children were weak and encouraged them to help their children with studying at home. The frequent contacts among teachers, VEDCs, and parents strengthened their social networks which generated solidarity as a basis for the students' academic achievement.

7.8 Summary

The key DESB staff have limited understanding of the complexity of educational opportunity in the district. Availability of a school in every village does not always mean that every child has an equal opportunity to access education. There are a variety of barriers in family, society and education system that marginalise rural children from an educational opportunity. The DESB staff need to think creatively about access and extend their understanding of what prevents some children from attending or remaining in school. In terms of the educational challenges they face, key DESB staff should reflect more deeply and comprehensively beyond low qualifications and salaries of teachers and poor parental involvement. The challenges also include the DESB staff's deficit views on other stakeholders and interpretations of the situations in ways that lay blame on teachers and parents. This research views the 'blaming' aspect as a serious challenge since the DESB staff do not seek hidden causes beyond their common-sense understandings.

There are many constraints to the internal efficiency which are related to families, schools, the DESB, and the policy demand. At the family level, parents have limited economic and cultural capitals important when accessing social capital in family and schooling fields. At the school level, low teaching/learning quality, a lack of textbooks, and multigrade classes contribute to poor learning performances of students. In the DESB, staff have limited economic and cultural capital such as

funds, analytical and interpretative knowledge and skills, and teaching and learning materials for schools. There is fund leakage which results in very limited professional development for staff and teachers in the district. The policy demands put pressure on principals and teachers to show their accountability and progress in educational development. This leads to fabrication of statistics in student enrolment and retention and a focus on satisfying the demand rather than student learning.

The relationship between the DESB and schools is relatively weak and is even weaker with VEDCs and parents. Hence, the DESB staff members need to strengthen their relationships with these local stakeholders. Mobilising the network of connections can provide the DESB staff with better insights into what individuals require so that the policy can be better developed. At the same time, these stakeholders can also gain new knowledge and encouragement from interacting with the DESB staff leading to an increase in work performance.

To increase students' enrolment, retention and academic performance, the DESB staff assign responsibilities to principals and teachers to collaborate with VEDCs and parents. The DESB staff members deal mainly with documentation in the office and wait for monthly reports from schools. The monthly meetings at the DESB are organised for principals by the DESB staff to exchange knowledge and experience, which is crucial for educational improvement.

Chapter 8
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the major findings presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are discussed in line with Bourdieusian constructs. The conceptual lenses of field, habitus, and capital (social, economic, and cultural) are adopted to investigate the political practices in fields of the DESB, three primary schools, and three villages and the participating families. The discussion in this chapter responds to three research questions. The first question asks how key DESB staff understand opportunities and challenges of primary education in the researched district. The second question considers what strategies key DESB staff use to ensure all primary school-aged children are in school. The last question asks what are the challenges that hinder improvement in the rates of school enrolment, retention, and academic performance of primary school students within the researched district and in responding to the sub-question, it examines the strategies used by the DESB, schools, and VEDCs to address these challenges. This chapter closes with discussion of the transformative potentials of Bourdieu's key concepts under three subheadings: the transformative habitus of parents, transformation of cultural capital, and transformation of the field.

To characterise the workings of the DESB, three schools, and three VEDCs, the researcher used the allegory of a soccer game in which teachers, VEDCs and parents are required by the coach (DESB) to play as a collaborative team in the field of primary education. The common goal to be achieved is to have all primary school-aged students in school and support them to meet the school requirements. This study identifies several problems occurring in the 'game' which restricts the performance of the players and the possibility of scoring the 'goal'. These problems have been deeply rooted in social, economic, and political structures for a long time. Even though the DESB, schools and villages have put effort into addressing those problems, many remain and seem to be difficult to remedy. The main obstacles which impede the progress of educational improvement in the researched district include:

- knowledge and skills of key DESB staff;
- poverty and its impact on educational improvement;
- teaching and learning process;
- relationships among families, the VEDCs, the schools, and the DESB; and
- opportunities for tertiary education and employment.

8.1 Knowledge and skills of key DESB staff

In relation to the figurative soccer game, key DESB staff play the role of coaches who have a range of responsibilities including translating the national policy, developing and disseminating strategic plans, organising professional development activities for teachers; and conducting monitoring and assessment of schools. In the DESB, most staff are former teachers, who have knowledge and skills obtained from experience of the same field. As such, the key DESB staff carry their common understandings of educational opportunities and school issues into the DESB and why they accept and rely on the school reports which mirror their common perceptions. They believe that a primary school and teachers located in every village means that all children have an opportunity to access primary education. However, there are several aspects, other than the school availability, that obstruct children's opportunity to access schooling in the three villages. These include children who live on farms far from school; those that tend cattle or stay at home with a young sibling, and some who help parents earn an income. Educational opportunity is not simply related to school availability or distance but is also linked to other complexities in family and society which prevent children from being engaged with the school system. Many parents living in poverty need to focus on day-to-day survival rather than thinking about investing time and money in a long-term educational plan, particularly when their investment in schooling does not guarantee subsequent economic return. Children born to poor families usually have a limited opportunity to go to school or to attend school regularly. Accordingly, all children in the district have not yet had an equal opportunity to access education.

The situation mentioned above contributes in part to the challenges of making improvements to primary education in the district. Key DESB staff have identified three challenges. One is related to teachers' salaries with the notion that low salaries deter teachers to commit themselves to working hard. This suggests that increasing teachers' salaries is one solution to improve teachers' performance in rural areas of Lao PDR. However, Indonesian data suggests that the unconditional increase to salaries for teachers in large-scale representative schools reveals that there is no meaningful positive effect on student learning performance (Ree, Muralidharan, Pradhan, & Rogers, 2015). Another challenge relates to teachers' qualifications. The key DESB staff members believe that students' low learning performance is partially the result of teachers' low qualifications. This suggests that the higher the qualifications teachers have, the better they perform, and the students learn. The last challenge concerns parental involvement. DESB staff blamed most parents for their lack of

encouragement and commitment in ensuring their children attend school and, they specifically targeted literate parents for not supervising their children's homework. Furthermore, some parents in all three villages were happy to use their children's unskilled labour potential, taking their children's schooling for granted but relying on their children to make that decision.

In summary, key DESB staff have limited grasp on the complexity of educational opportunities and challenges for the children in the district. They depend on their superficial understandings which they have collected over time from school reports. DESB staff work as educational leaders and managers in the district but are not trained to analyse and interpret the situations that occur in the schools and villages. For example, DESB staff tend to blame teachers, parents and students rather than seeking better insights and possible solutions to problems. They need to understand what schools require and consider if they have performed well enough to satisfy schools' needs in terms of academic and administrative work. Establishing schools in every village does not mean sufficient opportunities are provided for all children and does not ensure access for every child. The DESB staff need to analytically consider what stops children from accessing education and what children need from the education system. They also need to question whether their current goals and objectives are responsive to the root causes of the problems rather than reacting to reports from schools and placing blame on others. Accurate understandings and mediation of the problems at the local level is necessary for the DESB whose mandate is to prepare reports for policy makers.

8.2 Poverty and its impact upon educational improvement

Most rural parents still live in a chronic poverty cycle which limits many children's opportunities to access and achieve an education. The data analysis confirms that family economic capital matters significantly for rural children's schooling. Even though primary education in Lao PDR is officially free as indicated in many of its national policies, additional costs of uniforms, stationery, pocket money, school maintenance, and school events create financial burdens for many of the families in the researched villages. Parents who have more than one child in school have to spend proportionally more. In deciding to send their children to school, some parents are confronted with a dilemma between their daily livelihood and their children's uncertain future with schooling. Many live in survival mode, while their children's education is a long-term project. It is therefore difficult for parents to provide supportive environments, supervise homework, and monitor the learning performance of their children.

Many studies have documented the impact of family incomes on academic achievement. Generally, students from low-income families achieve less at school than those from wealthier families (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Buchmann & Hannum, 2001; Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016). The UNESCO (2010) also reports that family poverty contributes to educational marginalisation. In Southeast Asian countries, students from poor families have to work to help their parents with household chores or farming work, with the result that students do not attend school regularly (Lee, 2016). Similarly, this study finds, as presented in Chapter 5, that poverty is the main impediment to educational improvement in the district. Some parents need their children's help in caring for siblings in the home, tending cattle, or engaging in paid work. A similar finding comes from Papua New Guinea where the children drop out of school to assist their families in household and agricultural activities (Rena, 2011).

In the three researched villages, some parents take all their children to the farm to help with rice harvesting for many days at a time, without an awareness of the negative impact on their children's learning performance. Furthermore, many parents, in pursuit of economic capital accumulation, go to work in Thailand, leaving their children at home with grandparents. The extent of the poverty cycle is such that even some primary school children skip classes to earn money for themselves as parents cannot fulfil their financial needs. Poverty directly affects students' retention due to their lack of economic capital in negotiating an opportunity to stay willingly in the schooling system. Poor parents do not have the economic capital to enable them to participate in the social networks required to connect with their children's teachers and in schooling activities as most of their time is spent on daily survival.

Tackling the problem of poverty is very challenging. However, there is potential for the education system to relieve financial stress of education for parents. The DESB and schools could make a concerted effort to reduce the unnecessary costs such as school maintenance and school events for families. Recognition of family economic backgrounds reflected in education policy may contribute in part, to improving enrolment and retention when parents feel there is not as much financial investment required.

8.2.1 Lack of school facilities, curricular materials, and funds

Poverty is not only deeply rooted in families but also entrenched in the national education system, which manifests in poor school infrastructure, a lack of school facilities, a lack of teaching and learning materials, and limited funding. Schools Two and Three do not have teacher amenities or a library for teachers and students to gain access to additional cultural capital. These teachers do not have a personal space for keeping their instructional materials and for teaching preparation. With

limited resources to access more creative ways to develop their teaching practice, teachers commonly choose the conventional teaching method.

Textbooks and teacher guides are fundamental for the teaching and learning process in the rural schools as they are the only sources of cultural capital which students can access locally. However, all three schools seriously lack these basic materials in sufficient numbers for all students. It is difficult for the teachers to plan and teach students without textbooks. In every class, teachers deliver knowledge to their students through copying lessons on chalkboards and verbal explanations. Much of the available time is used by teachers copying lessons onto blackboards and by students copying these lessons into their notebooks. It is unknown whether the lack of curricular materials in the rural schools can be attributed to a problem of distribution or publication, but it is certainly one of several major challenges hindering primary educational improvement in the district.

It is suggested that the government consider adequate distribution of textbooks to all students to better address the goal of improving quality teaching and learning. Many plans and activities for educational improvement in the researched district are nullified as a consequence of inadequate economic capital with outcomes such as irregular monitoring, supervision and support from the DESB to schools and the lack of training programs and workshops for DESB staff and primary school teachers. Quality teaching and learning is the greatest challenge to improvements in primary education in the district. This claim is made based on the fact that most students do not have textbooks; teachers do not have enough teacher guides for every subject and teaching plans; and most teachers have not received pedagogical training. The limited public education funding presents major constraints preventing many educational activities relating to educational improvement. This study identifies similar challenges related to "lack of the teacher training, lack of teacher motivation, the need for curriculum revision, inadequate facilities and insufficient textbooks" in other Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2016, p. 473) and a lack of textbooks and other learning materials in both number and quality in other developing worlds (Mbiti, 2016).

Ineffective use of educational resources is viewed as a major barrier to achieving education development goals in various regions of the world (Al-Samarrai, 2006). The problems discussed above are a consequence of inadequate economic capital and may be partially due to embezzlement and misappropriation of budgets allocated for education (Chapman, 2002; Reinikka & Svensson, 2005). In fact, the annual fund allocated to DESB has the potential to make changes in educational improvement if used in a productive way. Ongoing corruption is embedded in the organisational habitus and has been imprinted in the bureaucratic system. In addressing this, however, increasing

public funding may not be an effective unless there is transparency in the way existing funding is used. A transparent process could confirm if annual funding allocated to the DESB was adequate for undertaking education development projects. Therefore, there is an urgent need for improvement of the financial processes across all levels of bureaucracy.

8.3 Teaching and learning process

In the three schools, the teaching and learning process is generally dominated by the conventional teacher-centred approach. Classes were not interactive, were conducted mostly in a lecturing style. Even though the Ministry of Education and Sports introduced the student-centred approach to all schools in the country in 1990s, the dominant and historically entrenched didactic teaching approach has been applied in primary and secondary education classrooms for many decades (Chounlamany, 2014). In the district, the DESB has strongly suggested introducing the learner-centred approach in every school and the pedagogical advisers have demonstrated the methodology to all primary school principals. However, nothing has changed in these schools because there are no adequate support and follow-up supervision from the pedagogical staff. The teachers in the three schools still prefer the teacher-centred method because of lack of support and many additional constraints including a shortage of textbooks, teaching plans, and supplementary materials. Policy demands on teachers to finish the textbooks in each academic year are exacerbated by the fact that no account of the amount of content and time taken to complete is taken on by authorities. Hence, a teacher-centred method, commonly referred to as 'chalk and talk' is seen by teachers to be more appropriate than focussing on students' learning.

The testing and marking system do not fit with the aims of an interactive teaching method. The objective of a test is to check how much individual students can remember rather than their understanding of what is taught. Those with good test results are considered good students. Examinations and rote learning allow teachers to continue conventional teaching methods which are firmly established in the structure of the teaching culture. All teachers are also the products from the classrooms of this teaching method, so it appears difficult for teachers to change their teaching methodology. Thus, teaching is still conducted largely in the lecturing style with limited classroom interaction. This teaching method is similar to the concept of 'banking' (Freire, 1993) where teachers attempt to deposit lesson contents in individual students' heads as much as possible, but deeper understandings of the lesson contents receive little attention. Under this pedagogy, students who are absent because of illness or helping parents are required to catch up their peers as soon as possible. Some may feel they are being pushed and become uncomfortable in classes as their cultural

capital is limited to support their performance in the field. This could lead to some students in the district dropping out of school.

Quality of the teaching and learning process can also be undermined by the unpaid work of probationary teachers, teacher shortages, and teacher absences and tardiness. It is interesting to note that in this district there are one hundred probationary teachers who work without pay. This issue is not identified in literature as an educational challenge in developing countries, but it exists in Lao PDR. It is difficult to imagine how these teachers can be encouraged to work effectively in the stressful situation of unpaid work. The teacher shortage has resulted in the formation of many multigrade classes in this district. These classes are not as crowded as in other developing countries (Mbiti, 2016) but provide teachers with additional problems of teaching two grades in one classroom at the same time.

Teacher absences have long been a challenge to educational improvement in developing countries (Biswal, 1999) and in most Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2016). Teacher absences were also observed in the three schools. Often the school principals leave their classes to attend meetings, submit school reports, or collect teacher salaries from the DESB and even attend customary ceremonies or social activities in the villages. During this data collection, the principals of schools Two and Three visited a model school in another district for a week. One school principal was absent for a week to attend his mother's funeral, and one teacher was absent to visit her doctor. Even though these are legitimate reasons for teachers being absent from school, there were not adequate substitutions. As a consequence, one teacher had to deal with two classes in different classrooms at the same time, which led to a reduction in class time. In addition to the teacher absence, it is also necessary to mention teacher tardiness. Most teachers in the three schools were observed starting their classes relatively late even though they arrived at school on time, because they spent time in conversations with colleagues. This problem is also identified in other developing countries (Lee, 2016; Mbiti, 2016). It can be concluded that the issues of probationary teachers working without pay, teacher shortages, teacher absences and tardiness are challenges that contribute to the low quality of teaching and learning process in the district.

To improve the teaching and learning process, aspects such as (1) revising the textbooks: reducing the curriculum contents to fit with the teaching time and modifying them to suit all contexts[31], and

[31] This does not mean to have special textbooks for the rural students. It means to include, for example, about 40 percent of rural contexts in Grade 1 textbooks, 30 percent in Grade 2 textbooks, 20 percent in Grade 3 textbooks, and so on. This is to facilitate Grade 1 students to feel comfortable and attracted with their first experience in classes. The rural-related contents are reduced while students are moving up in the school system.

including more interactive activities that enable teachers to develop their teaching plans; (2) changing the policy demand: focussing on what individual students learn in each class rather than completing the curriculum; and (3) modifying test contents: aim to explore how well individual students understand, not how well individuals remember what has been taught in classrooms. In addition, education policy needs to avoid creating bureaucratic fear among DESB staff and school teachers but rather create free spaces for local educators to develop teaching and learning autonomy (Chounlamany, 2014). Consistent supply of materials and pedagogical support for schools are necessary to increase control to disrupt the default structure in teaching culture and teaching habitus.

8.4 Relationships among parents, VEDCs, teachers, and DESB staff

In this study, relationships network of families, VEDCs, and schools are shown to be relatively weak. The soccer game is an appropriate analogy for explaining the ways these relationships impact educational improvement in the district. Parents, VEDCs and teachers are viewed as players who are placed in different positions in the field. Individuals need different skills to score the goal. The DESB staff, as coaches are responsible for training the teachers, VEDCs, and parents and devising strategic plans for them to implement at their school. However, the parents and VEDCs lack the knowledge of how to be engaged thoroughly in education, how to work in a team, and how to be supportive. These learnings are viewed as cultural capital and are necessary for stakeholders to fully participate in education. Importantly, their 'feel for the game' is relatively low as parents are pessimistic in their outlook for success and lack the cultural and economic capital to help their children participate in schooling activities. Although parents and VEDCs are required to be on the schooling field as team members, teachers do not often communicate with them about school-related issues with the result that the social capital between them is inadequate. Teachers play a key role in the team with limited cooperation from the DESB, VEDCs, and parents. The DESB staff members are not on the field to observe how the teachers and VEDCs work, identify and analyse problems, and find possible solutions. They rely mainly on reports from principals about what goes on in the field. Principals cannot clearly identify problems as they are insiders as performers and lack analytical knowledge of the phenomena. Overall, teachers are left alone to play in isolation without cooperation of parents, VEDCs, and the DESB. The coaches blame the parents and VEDCs for not performing well but it also demonstrates how they instigate the way the game is played in terms of school improvement.

Most parents lack several important resources for facilitating them to play the game well. One is the cultural knowledge pertaining to the school field which is useful in negotiating their own position in

the field. Most parents are not accustomed to and know little about the educational field (Bourdieu, 1977, 2006). Familiarity and knowledge are viewed as cultural capital necessary for parents to establish and maintain relationships with teachers and shape their children's habitus in relation to schooling at home. Some illiterate parents do not have the knowledge to help or encourage their children and without this capital, parents view that educational improvement is only in the hands of the schools and the DESB. Hence, parents need to be well equipped with skills in which they could become productively involved in their children's education. This is not to make parents more responsible but to help them to be more supportive. Economic capital is another important resource to facilitate access to other types of capital and is a level of security for parents and children in the schooling game. As most families are part of an agricultural economy, they are often away working on their farms. Some also go to work in Thailand, leaving their children behind with their grandparents. Although parents recognise the benefits of education and want their children to achieve, they do not participate in their children's schooling. The problem of weak relationships between parents and teachers is not only found in this district but also features in literature from other developing countries (Mbiti, 2016).

Parents need to be equipped with useful knowledge and skills about ways they can be involved in education and how they can work collaboratively with VEDCs and teachers. They should also understand the value of participation and how to support their children. Teachers and the DESB staff are the initial builders of the social networks with parents and those who constantly maintain and support parents to be involved in education. Most importantly, parents need to be given hope and be convinced that their children will have equal opportunity to enter tertiary education and employment based on merit. Parents need to be assured that their commitment to the educational game is worth investing time, money, and energy.

VEDCs make some contributions to education improvement in the three villages. The VEDCs maintain school facilities, approve school rules and development plans, and advise parents to enrol their school-aged children in school. Occasionally, they visit parents whose children have frequent absences, at the school's request. That is, if schools do not communicate with them, they do nothing in relation to school. In fact, VEDCs encounter difficulties in working with parents and schools as VEDCs and their children have a similar status to other villagers in terms of educational knowledge and experience. Thus, it is essential for the DESB or higher authorities to take this issue into account.

Teachers are the key stakeholders who possess better cultural capital than parents and VEDCs. Generally, teachers have little communication with parents and VEDCs, and side step the opportunity

to show how students could get help from home. This does not mean that teachers do not want to involve parents and VEDCs in the game, but it suggests that parents understand little about schooling or the content being taught, and they are too concerned about matters of meeting basic living needs. Lack of communication with parents and VEDCs in the schooling game has the same effect as passing the ball. For better performance, teachers need to be continually trained in the application of new tactics of managing classes, delivering knowledge to students, and working with parents and VEDCs effectively.

As the coaches, DESB staff must move closer to local reality to see how teachers, VEDCs and parents work as a team. More precisely, the DESB staff need to understand exactly what schools and parents need from the education system and compensate for what they lack. If the DESB requires the parents to be active and supportive and contribute to increasing student enrolment, retention, and academic performance, the DESB should intervene in situations that disadvantage the poor and convince parents that every child has an equal chance to achieve through education.

To encourage parents to be involved in schooling improvement, it is necessary to be aware of and attempt to satisfy their aspirations. According to Maslow (1970), people are motivated to achieve a hierarchy of needs, and must meet the needs of its lower levels before they can be driven to tackle the higher levels. Parents in this study certainly want their children to fulfil higher needs. And yet, the data analysis reveals that parents are likely to have different requirements from the education system than that of schools and the DESB. Parents' key goal for schooling is employment for their children. However, the schools and the DESB tend to focus on the statistical achievement of students to show work performance and accountability to a higher authority. To progress well in educational improvement goals, parents, teachers, DESB staff, and the government should have the same targets and vision. In addition, the DESB staff and the government must examine the needs of parents and have a valuable understanding of students' habitus and capitals. Achieving the sustainable development goal 4 statistically by 2030 has no meaning for rural children who are left wanting to be employed by the government. This achievement may bring limited and probably no impact on improving rural people's economic and cultural capital and their living conditions and disposition of education. Education that responds to local needs will help address the issue of social justice and sustain socio-economic development of society. DESB staff should thus gain insights into local needs and report them to the higher authority in order to inform government policies that could respond appropriately.

8.5 Opportunities to tertiary education[32] and employment[33]

Parents are well aware of the limited opportunities for rural children who possess less economic and social capital. For example, opportunities to access the tertiary education and employment field are often determined by a compensatory payment (Stuart-fox, 2006). Students who have special relationships with the gatekeepers have greater chances to enter those fields. Parents who do not have the economic and social capital feel discouraged and pessimistic about investing in the schooling business. Even though the majority of children have access to primary education, parents are less certain that schooling achievement will successfully translate into employment. This research has discerned that attending school may be viewed as just one of traditional practices for young children while they are waiting to be ready to engage in household income activities.

In the competition for tertiary entrance and job opportunities, winners by any means, are usually those from middle class families in urban areas. In the researched district, parents complained that it is very difficult for their children to gain access to tertiary education and even more difficult to access employment. Many people who have completed teacher training college remain unemployed and many work as probationary teachers without pay and have done so for more than three years. These incidents discourage parents from willingly investing in their children's education as they do not trust the education system which eventually results in some children dropping out of school. Documented studies show that lack of employment opportunities for school or university graduates also exists in other Southeast Asian countries (Lee, 2016). This study supports the work of Bourdieu (1977) who states that the education system worsens the current inequalities because it advantages higher status students and because lower status counterparts may withdraw themselves from schooling. This finding parallels studies in rural areas of Australia where students drop out of school because of the lack of employment opportunities in their town (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Mills, 2008). This, employment opportunities are a crucial variable for retaining students at school and motivating them to do their best.

Limited opportunities for accessing tertiary school and employment fields add to the rural parents' sense of despondency in the education system. This leads to some parents maintaining the status quo, the cultural reproduction of their class and its movement through habitus, defined by Mills as

[32] This is the aspiration for rural parents after their children complete upper secondary school. In Chapter 5 the parents talk about their expectations for their children's schooling.

[33] Employment opportunity in this study refers to an opportunity for rural children to work in the government organisations. This is also the aspiration and major goal of sending children to school.

"taking things for granted, rather than recognising that there are ways that the situation could be transformed" (Mills, 2008, p. 102). Some parents in the three villages did not attempt to create opportunities for their children to transform their current situation. Inadequate employment opportunities and poverty contributes to parents feeling the burden of their circumstances. For instance, one mother shouted at her child who needed pocket money, "No money", and tells her child to drop out of school. Another mother's brusque response to her daughter who asks for help, "I am not your teacher. If I want to be a teacher, I will not have sent you to school". Some parents tell their children, "Go if you want to go. Don't go if you don't want to. I am not a teacher but I …*[interrupted]* ……but I *[can survive, have rice to eat and money to spend]*". These parents probably think that educational achievement is out of reach of their children. Some parents whose children are not enrolled in school voice their opinion, "What is 'going to school' for? I don't see anyone in the village who has gone to school being employed". These anecdotes illustrate the reproductive habitus of parents who do not attempt to create opportunities and see the potential for their children to move out of a cycle of their current socio-economic status.

Mediating privilege in the education system and employment field by the power of economic capital disadvantages many children from poor families. The convergence of the two constraints – family poverty and the unjust education system – shares restrictions on educational opportunities for all poor children. This convergence then leads some parents to devalue their children's education contributing to the reproductive habitus. If the education system offers a fair go for all students, determined by individual merit, rural children and parents will be more motivated to invest in education. If there is something to blame, parents can blame themselves for lacking necessary resources for their children to take to schools or blame schools for privileging the dominant culture and disadvantaging the dominated one. Policy makers should think about compensating what students lack at home, changing the school culture and requirements to reduce the widespread gap between home and school cultures.

8.6 Transformative potential of Bourdieusian key concepts

Mills (2008) suggests that although Bourdieu's theoretical constructs have been criticised for their latent determinism, there are transformative potentials of habitus, cultural capital, and field. This suggests possibilities for the DESB and schools to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students. The process of transformation involves "the importance of linking pedagogy to social change, connecting critical learning to the experiences and histories that students brought to the classroom, and engaging the space of schooling as a site of contestation, resistance, and possibility"

(Giroux, 2003, p. 6). In this study, there are transformative potentials of the key Bourdieusian constructs in ways to improve learning achievement of the primary school pupils in the researched schools. These include transformative habitus of parents, transformation of cultural capital, and transformation of field. The transformation of cultural capital and field can be embedded in policy for enhancing the enrolment, retention, and academic performance of primary school students.

8.6.1 Transformative habitus of parents

In this study, most parents both those with children attending school and those whose children are out of school, want them to have a better future with a higher social status. They want their children to escape from their current situations to create their own new worlds in which their lives will be better. They all see educational achievement as a way to realise those possibilities. That is why most parents want their children to go to school and have paid jobs. Although there is recognition of limited opportunities to enter a field of higher education and employment, parents with transformative habitus still see some opportunities and potential for their children to change the current situation. Parents who are employed believe that employment opportunities are often available because of staff retirements and transfers every year. Some parents who are farmers recognise that education is not only to gain employment but also to enable their children to survive under any circumstances in society.

The transformative habitus of parents can be formed in several ways. It may be nurtured by the VEDCs who encourage them and also by the fact that some people from their community do gain employment as local government staff, and especially as teachers. Importantly, advances in the development of transport, communication and media brings the rural population closer to urban culture and formation of transformative habitus. More people seek work in cities and Thailand where they acquire transformative habitus.

The transformative habitus of parents is shaped by other ideas of employment in the private sector or the potential of small business ownership for their children. Parents with transformative habitus seek ways for their children to alter their current social class and they see possibilities rather than reproducing the status of accepting the world being made for them. They recognise opportunities for improvisation and act in ways to disrupt reproductive situations in the social field rather than simply being acted on.

8.6.2 Transformation of cultural capital

Cultural capital that is valued in schools can be transformed by teachers who are key agents of transformation within the education system (Tyler, 2011), through real-world curriculum and pedagogy (Mills, 2008). In this study, teachers transform cultural capital through their lesson content, class instructions, and assessments. Teachers can adapt their lesson content to suit their students' funds of knowledge, avoiding particular linguistic structures, stories, places, and others that alienate rural students. In classes, when giving examples to students, teachers can refer to social activities, events, fruits, animals, and objects that exist in their locality. Teachers need to relate to the students' world and bring this into the classroom. This will make lesson content relevant to students' virtual school bag and make classrooms more inclusive by acknowledging local knowledge (Comber & Hill, 2000).

In classes, teachers arrange activities to suit individual students with different levels of cultural capital. Teachers provide their students with different activities and assessments sorted by complexity to suit the range of achievement levels. Teachers also pose different questions for students with different levels of learning outcomes. These strategies transform cultural capital to better fit local students' histories, leading to transformation of cultural capital of schools. It is the schools that must change, not their students (Delpit, 1988), because the schools disadvantage their students (Thomson, 2002). Teachers can make a difference for their students by simplifying the school standards through modifying lesson content, classroom instruction, and a testing system that facilitate all their students to acquire knowledge at school.

8.6.3 Transformation of the field

In the educational setting, the school rules are established by the dominant group and it seems that everyone is free to play. That is, everyone has an equal right to access education and equal opportunity to achieve success. This is consistent with transformation of the field, which is inclusive of the marginalised children in the schooling game (Mills, 2008). The current study has identified that all three schools open the door to every school aged child in the villages, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. To ensure all children are in school, teachers work collaboratively with VEDCs to cultivate parents with transformative habitus, responding to their family economic hardships, and acknowledging the student's virtual school bag.

In responding to parents' family economic hardships, any students whose family financial status is verified as very poor by the headman of village are not required to pay school fees. To reduce parents' schooling costs, there are no strict regulations forcing students to wear school uniforms. In

School One and Three, the teachers provide poor students with clothing and stationery. The schools also accept students who are enrolled late or absent for more than a month to help parents accumulate familial economic capital.

In acknowledging students' funds of knowledge, teachers adapt lesson contents to suit their students' existing knowledge base, replacing some content that is too remote from their experience. This is not to say that rural students have less ability but that they come to school with limited cultural and social capital, and a different habitus from other social groups. The DESB also advises teachers to use questioning techniques which cover a wide range of complexity to assess students with different levels of learning performance. When students can feel secure and confident with the support of cultural capital brought from home, they have an equal opportunity to achieve successfully. To pave the way for improvement in the educational outcomes of marginalised students, a revolutionary struggle is needed (Mills, 2008). The transformative possibility is not only in parental habitus but also educational opportunities available to their children that will benefit disadvantaged and marginalised individuals (Mills, 2008b).

8.7 Summary

Five main challenges have been identified which impede primary education development in the district. The first is related to the ability of key DESB staff to clearly understand the opportunities and challenges for education in the area. DESB staff members need to be able to analyse the educational situations, diagnose and prescribe the right solutions to the problems. The second concerns the limitation of economic capital. For the family, poverty discourages students from remaining in school system and severely destabilises educational progress in the district. For the school, unsatisfactory school facilities and resources deter educational development activities, the regular monitoring of learning outcomes, and strengthening relationships among stakeholders. The third challenge is related to poor teaching and learning quality. Unpaid work for probationary teachers, teacher shortages, and teacher absences and tardiness can impact on teaching and learning quality. The fourth challenge is related to weak relationships between parents, VEDCs, teachers, DESB staff. The schools are likely to be left alone to develop education with inadequate support from the DESB and involvement of parents and VEDCs. The last challenge relates to limited opportunities to enter tertiary education and employment for the rural students. Those who have greater opportunities to be employed, generally possess better economic capital and social capital than others.

The transformative potentials of Bourdieu's constructs suggest possibilities for the DESB and schools to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students. The transformative habitus of parents is a good foundation for increasing the degree of parental involvement and educational development in the district. It is the DESB and schools who are in the position to create school friendly environments for children with different habitus and limited economic, social, and cultural capitals in the schooling field. The transformation of cultural capital and field is a means to provide opportunity for all children in the district to access education. The process of transformation involves linking pedagogy to social change, connecting some lesson content to students' virtual school bag, and matching test contents to students' performance levels.

Chapter 9
CONCLUSION

This final chapter discusses the findings that respond to the three research questions. It then provides implications of the findings for theory and practice, and following that, offers some limitations of the study. Finally, this study provides some recommendations for further research, building on the findings to clarify some of the issues in the area.

The aim of this study has been to investigate how DESB staff members understand and work with primary schools and communities to ensure all children in the district complete primary school with the level of literacy and numeracy prescribed in the curriculum. Three research questions were formulated for this study.

1. How do DESB staff understand the opportunities and challenges of primary education in the researched district?

2. What strategies do DESB staff use to ensure all children in the district complete primary education, without repeating the same grade, having achieved levels of literacy and numeracy prescribed in the curriculum?

3. What are the challenges hindering enrolment, retention, and learning performance of primary school students in the district? How are these challenges addressed by the schools and VEDCs?

This project is a bounded multi-site case study utilising quasi ethnographic methods. Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, observations, and document analysis. The participants were six key DESB staff, all staff from the three primary schools, three village headmen, and 18 parents. For data analysis, Bourdieusian concepts of field, habitus, and capital (social, economic, cultural) were used as conceptual lenses.

9.1 Key findings

The key findings are briefly summarised from previous chapters: Chapter 5, 6, and 7 in response to the three research questions.

RQ 1: The key DESB staff members understand educational opportunity as availability of a school in every village. As every village has a primary school, providing for at least Grades 1 to 3, it is

assumed all children in the district have the opportunity to access education. Schooling is offered to all children in the village, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, and economic background. The DESB has a regulated view of the term 'educational opportunity'. Apart from locating a primary school and teachers in every village, DESB belief is that nothing more is required for students to have the oppportunity to access formal schooling.

DESB staff understand educational challenges in the district to be related to teacher qualifications, teacher salaries, and the lack of parental involvement. They consider teachers to have low level qualifications and insufficient academic knowledge to teach students. They believe that the higher the qualification, the better the quality of teaching resulting in better student performance outcomes. Therefore, it seems teachers have limited cultural capital to qualify as effective teachers. The key DESB staff members are also aware that teachers' low salaries present another educational challenge. Teachers are disappointed with their salaries, and consequently are less committed to their work. DESB staff think that increased salaries for teachers can raise their motivation and commitment levels and develop a stronger work ethic. Teachers' salaries are in parity with the economic capital that challenges the development of education in this district. Lack of parental involvement also offers a challenge. DESB staff blame parents for not showing interest in their children's education. Parents are seen as being concerned only with their subsistence rather than creating the best possible opportunities for their children to go to school. For instance, some parents involve their children in housework, agricultural activities, and earning money. Parents fail to take their children's education seriously and allow their children to make decisions about their schooling by themselves. At home, parents do not supervise their children's school work but allow them to watch TV. These behaviours and modes of thinking is parental habitus and is not relevant to schooling.

DESB staff members also discuss other aspects that curtail educational improvement in the district. One is their own department lacking the analytical and interpretative skills to process schools' data, so they become reliant on unverified school reports. Their work direction comes from a higher authority and not from personal initiative to enhance their own and teachers' work performance. Funding shortages are a common justification for poor school improvement rates as DESB staff said that they do not have sufficient funds for organising training programs for teachers, visiting schools, and carrying out activities for supporting schools. Furthermore, funds which are misappropriated cause the small bucket of funding to become even smaller. Another challenge is a shortage of textbooks for students, together with a shortage of teacher guides for some subjects across the district. In this situation, teachers encounter difficulties in organising their teaching activities because

teachers mainly follow instructions and activities in textbooks. The process of transferring knowledge from textbooks to students in classes takes time. Chalkboards are used as the main visual aids for content delivery, and teachers spend time explaining the activities to their students. The time for students to learn and practise skills in each class is condensed and significantly less than it should be.

RQ 2: DESB work culture is noticeably relaxed as staff wait for directions. There is no sense of being proactive or being able to implement initiatives to improve work proficiency. The DESB works toward contributing to achieving the national goals–as a strategic unit and a distributor. As a strategic unit, the DESB set the targets for each school in the district based on their current conditions and capacity. In meetings, the DESB communicates strategic plans and demonstrates interactive teaching methodology to principals before each academic year. In each monthly meeting, principals report their achievements and challenges to the DESB and receive further advice from appropriate DESB staff. The DESB staff rarely visit them to see how well the plan is implemented or to identify any other barriers. During the semester, the DESB deals predominantly with administrative work in the office such as statistics pertaining to educational personnel and students in the district. The DESB staff who oversee this work are busy, while others play a non-interventionist role. As a distributor, the DESB disseminates goals and policies and distributes teaching and learning materials to schools after receiving them from the MoES. The DESB also has the responsibility of allocating primary school teachers within the district, recruiting new teachers, and paying teachers' salaries.

Generally, the work done by the DESB is not difficult or stressful but adheres to a predictable routine. It is the presumed, habitual, repetitive nature of the culture in which individuals act through habitus. Everyday work within the DESB is comparable with housework where the same procedures are followed each day, but staff lack the initiative to enact change and improve work performance.

RQ 3: Many challenges hinder educational improvement in the district. Family economic capital is one that frequently prevents enrolment and retention of students as some parents do not have sufficient financial support for their children's schooling. The families' urgent need is daily survival rather than education, so they need their children to work in order to contribute to the family subsistence level. Other barriers that impact on school retention include student illness and being over-age, both of which cause some students to drop out. Parents are disheartened by the limited opportunities for their children to achieve educational success after they complete upper secondary school. Consequently, most parents allow their children to make decisions about their own schooling pathways. Limited socialisation between family members has an impact on academic performance.

While parents may be literate, their children do not often receive school related cultural capital from them and hence, students have funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) that are not preferred by the school system. Schools become alien places for children as their 'virtual schoolbag' (Thomson, 2002) does not contain useful knowledge to adapt to the school culture. Instead, children are forced to put away what they have learned from home to learn new ideas, think and behave in different ways. Many children from these villages are disaffected by formal schooling.

Schools and teachers have a strong impact on learner achievement. The dominant teaching methodology in the researched area is teacher-centred, where teachers follow the textbook contents, but lack good lesson preparation and favour 'chalk and talk'. It is evident that teachers do not recognise that their students have cultural capital, have a 'virtual schoolbag', or funds of knowledge that differ from that rewarded at school. Instead, they often blame the children for being disinterested in schooling. Teacher absenteeism and an inclination to be tardy in starting lessons on time reduces available teaching and learning time. Limited opportunities for teachers to access professional development and a shortage of textbooks and teacher guides, further contribute to poor learning performance. And yet, the system expects all teachers to complete the curriculum by the end of each school year. This forces teachers to focus on working through the textbooks and finishing on time rather than spending time to support their students' learning. This practice leads to fabrication of school statistics to satisfy system demand and demonstrate accountability.

Schools and VEDCs are responsible for addressing the problems of student enrolment, retention and academic performance while the DESB provides both an administrative and professional overview. VEDCs are responsible for reminding parents about compulsory enrolment for their school-aged children before the start of the school year and visit families whose children are not at school or are absent for three consecutive days during the semester. Teachers also visit the parents to check on absent children and communicate with VEDCs when assistance is needed. Significantly, children of poor families are not required to pay school fees. Schools allow students to wear casual clothes to school and accept students who are enrolled late or absent for months. To enhance academic performance of students, teachers adapt some lesson contents to suit the students' experiences. Teachers also organise extra classes for low performing students once a week, give homework to their students, and tell their students to study more at home.

9.2 Implications of the findings for theory

The need for educational reform in Lao PDR has placed pressure on all levels of the schooling system to improve student learning outcomes. At the district level, the DESB needs to find effective ways to increase enrolment, retention and academic performance for primary school students, especially in rural locations where there is low achievement. This study is a ground-breaking project which contributes significantly to knowledge of rural education in Lao PDR. It unearths educational barriers for families, schools, the DESB, and the education system that collectively threaten educational progress in the district.

- The DESB staff members and teachers require analytical knowledge to gain insights into the complex reality of social and cultural life in the rural contexts that has formed parental habitus. The lack of this knowledge leads them to form mismatched interpretations of the phenomena. Therefore, sufficient knowledge of local contexts is essential to gain a broader understanding of the generational transmission of inequality in the societies.

- Rather than emphasising internal quality of primary education (teaching, learning and assessment activities), the DESB staff have tended to highlight accomplishment of their duties and the achievement of good statistics for student enrolment and retention to satisfy policy demands. They have attempted to wrap primary education in the district with a good-looking packaging, ignoring the quality of a product inside the box. This value has been the habitus of the DESB embedded by policy demands and the major cause of low academic performance being the most serious problem in the district.

- Attending to the directives of a higher authority has become the habitus of the DESB and schools where they habitually follow the same working pattern or routine. The most significant finding is the top-down blaming culture which creates bureaucratic fear and pressure among teachers leading to fabrication of school statistics to avoid censure and, at the same time, to demonstrate accountability.

- Generally, rural parents are interested in sending their children to school and want them to be employed by the government. However, limited opportunity to access higher education and employment fields have discouraged and demotivated them from willingly supporting their children's schooling. Accessibility to these fields is widely known to be mediated by the possession of social or economic capital. This has shaped parental habitus in the way that sees education as

something out of reach for their children. As such, they take their children's education for granted and are not willing to invest time and money in education.

- This study does not deny that parental cultural capital has an influence on student outcomes, but it does not always guarantee the students' retention. What makes a difference in student retention is the social capital in the family where habitus of schooling originates. This is because socialisations in family have a positive impact on shaping children's habitus of schooling at an early stage. Therefore, there is the need for parents to change their traditional parenting style that restricts family socialisations and social capital mobilisations.

- Bourdieu argues that educational inequality is only related to the economic and cultural capital students possess. In the district, children from better income families access more formal education and are more likely to complete schooling. As such, the education system continues creating the marginalisation of rural students and reproduction of inequality as some children in each of the three villages still live in poverty and their cultural capital from home, is not rewarded at school. Thus, concepts of habitus and capital that match school requirements are essential for educational improvement in the district.

9.3 Implications for practice

Inequalities in educational achievement still exist and continue to be reproduced year after year. Therefore, this study aims to gain insights into actual challenges which constantly hold back educational progress and provide possible solutions for the government and policy makers. The study identifies many problems at local level that need to be changed in order to enhance teaching and learning quality. As the researcher, I cannot provide recommendations to specific bodies, but the following drawn from the findings are important to take into consideration.

- There is need for revision of the current textbook contents to better suit teaching time and contexts. This does not mean to simplify textbooks for rural students but to include more contents that are relevant to rural contexts for the early grades.
- The demands of policy must avoid creating bureaucratic fear among teachers who eventually invent student statistics to avoid blame and censure. While it solves immediate problems for teachers, it is not good for students in the long term who need cultural capital to secure their futures. Furthermore, fabrication also negatively impacts on the reputation of the education system in reproducing ineffective human resources.

- It seems that the DESB and every school work towards achieving the targets set in education policies and take what students learn every day for granted. This study suggests the need to focus on students' critical and functional literacy learning rather than statistically achieving the targets.
- To apply the student-centred approach nationally and effectively, professional training for teachers needs to be ongoing. Assessments should evaluate how well individual students understand rather than how much individual students can remember what they have learnt. Instead of rote learning, students need to be equipped with critical thinking and problem-solving skills which are necessary to participate in improving their society.
- Most DESB staff members lack relevant knowledge and skills for executing their work and supporting schools and parents. As they are former teachers and not trained to be administrators, their understanding of opportunity and challenges is no different from teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to have training programs for the DESB staff members to alter the ways they interpret the phenomena.
- Parents should be equipped with knowledge about the school system, employment opportunities, and how to create supportive environments for their children.
- Although free primary education is offered by the government, it is not truly free in practice. Each student is still required to pay the school maintenance fee and other costs to schools. It is still a financial burden for many rural parents who have very low and unstable incomes and have many children in school. Therefore, parents who cannot support their children's school financially, need assistance.
- Most significantly, the education system should ensure an equal opportunity for all to access tertiary education and the employment field. The opportunity should not be mediated by thickness of wallets or strength of kinship relationships but determined by individuals' academic merits. With this criterion, every student will have an equal chance if they commit to study, and parents will be willing to become involved in the educational improvement process if they feel it is worth the investment.
- Key DESB staff, principals, and teachers need to possess the fortitude to seek differences and innovative ways of thinking and working in schools. To successfully achieve success, everyone must start from changing their own dispositions.

9.4 Limitations of the research

Although this study was carefully prepared, there are some limitations and shortcomings. The time was rather short for data collection in each case. The three-week observations at each case study site may not have provided sufficient time for me to gain deeper insights into cultural phenomena in the DESB, schools and villages. The data are mostly drawn from interviews and group discussions. The participants were from the same districts; most of them knew each other personally and professionally, so naturally they may have had similar views and perspectives. My personal experiences and knowledge of the area will have potential bias that places limitations on my analysis.

9.5 Recommendations for further research

The findings from this case study lead to recommendations for future research that adds to the body of literature on the role of the rural DESB, primary schools, and VEDCs in improving primary education in Lao PDR. Based on the findings, more studies are needed to enrich this body of literature.

- This study was conducted in one district on the lowland where local people are relatively homogenous. Similar research could be done in mountainous districts where there are diversities of ethnicities and religions. This is to explore the similarities and differences in the research findings when conducted in different locations, so that policymakers and planners can make better decisions on selecting strategies.
- This study has not yet provided clear explanations for those who dropped out of school after they had been unwell for many days. Personnel interaction issues in classrooms can have a serious effect on students. Another research initiative could focus on classroom observations and student work to identify what exactly discourages students.
- A comparative study can be conducted to identify what makes outperforming and underperforming schools different in similar contexts. That is, what are the most successful interventions in improving enrolment, retention and learning performance of students?
- This study identifies that some students living with grandparents outperform those staying with their own parents. Children of some literate parents perform academically poorer than those of illiterate parents. There are no explanations for these discrepancies Therefore, further research could seek clear explanations of the kind of home factors that significantly influence student learning performance.

- Further research can include children in interviews. It would be interesting to know what children think about schooling and what challenges them at school. It would also be valuable to record the feelings and thoughts of those who are frequently absent, drop out, or underperform and to identify effective strategies to support them.
- As this study was conducted in only one district, it could be replicated with other districts, with more schools, and parents to compare findings.

9.6 Summary

Primary education development in this rural district was impeded by several challenges concerning social, economic and cultural capital and habitus. The DESB staff members have limited understanding of educational opportunities and challenges. Their understanding lies at the surface of what actually prevent the opportunities of the several rural children to access and achieve primary education. Limited cooperation between the DESB staff, school teachers, and parents remains a challenge. A shortage of teaching and learning materials and financial resources continuously impedes the progress of primary education in the district. To meet the expectations of the policy demands, the teachers have to focus on finishing textbooks on time rather than spending class time on their students' learning. Some schools have unpaid probationary teachers, teacher shortages, and teacher absences and tardiness. Some schools fabricate their school statistics to satisfy the policy demand and demonstrate their accountability. For parents, daily survival pushes most of them to involve their children in housework and farm work, reducing their school attendance and retention. All in all, increasing student enrolment, retention and academic performance in this district is difficult as there are a range of major challenges waiting to be solved.

It is no simple matter to change the mediating practices of schooling. The effort to improve primary education in the district should go on. Based on the research findings, I would like to provide some suggestions to policy makers at all levels, DESB staff members, and teachers. There is a need to redistribute resources, redesign pedagogical processes, improve the performance of particular schooling actors (individual DESB staff members, principals, and teachers) and reform schooling structures and cultures. Local parents should be informed of what they need to do and how they can contribute to school improvement. They should also be convinced of the benefits of schooling for their children's daily life, not just for employment. It would be better if school principals are aware of indirect costs and consider avoiding school activities that place financial burdens on parents. The DESB should investigate and find ways to assist underperforming schools rather than

creating bureaucratic fear among them. In addition, teachers should try to understand the personal and family problems of those frequently absent from school and help them, never blaming them.

I hope this thesis can provide policy makers with ideas for future education policy, to better tackle educational challenges in different contexts, and to meet the best interests of the people and the nation. I also hope that this study can remind key staff of provincial educational and sports services and district education and sports bureaux to reflect on how to disrupt cultural norms that disadvantage rural children and restrain educational progress in rural districts.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview questions

For DESB staff

Main questions	Points to be covered	Generic prompts
• What is the nature of educational disadvantage in your district?	○ Views/visions for primary education achievement ○ Views about student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion rates ○ Reasons for students' un-enrolment and dropout: social, economic, cultural, personal reasons ○ Reasons related to schools and DESB ○ Views about responsibility for each of these issues ○ Knowledge about local people's perception, attitudes and beliefs about education, and their problems and needs ○ Expectation of schools and communities	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you clarify a little on this? • Can you explain more clearly? • Can you give me in detail? • Can you tell me anything else? • Can you give me some examples?
• How do you work to improve student enrolment, retention, attainment and completion rates in your school?	○ Goal setting and action plans: people involved, how to communicate to schools and communities, how to ensure if it is fully implemented ○ Resource allocation (personnel, budgets, teaching-learning materials, facilities, etc.) ○ Use of data (monitoring, assessment, reports, test scores, etc.) for planning and making instructional & resource allocation decisions, etc. ○ Pedagogical and technical advice: teaching techniques, class management, teaching plans ○ Professional development: training, workshops, group discussion, self-reflection, academic meetings ○ Policy: regulation, rules, incentives, work promotion ○ Monitoring and assessment ○ Community participation encouragement · Visits to communities, promotion of educational benefits; presentation of education system and job opportunities; and income, role, status comparison between literate and illiterate people in communities · Recognition of good students and their families · Listening to local voices · Reduction/abolishment of school maintenance fees	
• What are student enrolment, retention, and completion challenges hindering your school improvement?	○ Challenges at DESB, school, community, family, and for yourself ○ Extent to which economic, cultural, and social issues affecting student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion	
• Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to share?		

For school principals

Main questions	Points to be covered	Generic prompts
• What is the nature of educational disadvantage in your school?	○ Views/visions for school achievement ○ Feelings about the school, teaching job, their students, communities ○ Views about student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion rates ○ Reasons for students' un-enrolment and dropout: social, economic, cultural, personal reasons ○ Reasons related to schools and DESB ○ Views about responsibility for each of these issues ○ Expectation of teachers, students and parents ○ Knowledge about parents' perception, attitudes and beliefs about education, and their problems and needs	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you clarify a little on this? • Can you explain more clearly? • Can you tell me anything else? • Can you give me some examples?
• How do you work to improve student enrolment, retention, attainment and completion rates in your school?	○ **School management**: management committee ○ Goals/focus, vision, aspiration, core values ○ Management of personnel, resources, budget ○ Monitoring and assessment of teaching and managing performance, planning, acting ○ **Professional improvement**: training, group discussion, self-reflection, school academic meetings, classroom observations and feedback, teaching supervision ○ **Culture**: collaborations, relationships among staff, staff-student relationships, attitudes towards students' failures, commitments, staff meetings, ceremonies, events, policies, rules ○ **School restructuring**: changes in instructional activities/techniques, systems of rewards and penalties, disciplines, responsibility, power ○ Relationships with parents/communities · Promotion of educational benefits · Invitation of parents to school events · Reports of students' learning performance · Recognition of good students and their families · Reduction/abolishment of school maintenance fees	
• What are student enrolment, retention, and completion challenges hindering your school improvement?	○ Challenges at school and community level and for you ○ Extent to which economic, cultural, and social issues affecting student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion	

• Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to share?

For village headmen

Main questions	Points to be covered	Generic prompts
• What is the nature of educational disadvantage in your village?	○ Views about parents/ community's attitudes toward education ○ Views about student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion rates ○ Reasons why some school-aged children do not go to school and some drop out after the enrolment	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you clarify a little on this? • Can you explain more clearly? • Can you tell me anything else? • Can you give me some examples?
• How do you work to improve student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion rates?	○ Education development committee members ○ Main roles/responsibilities ○ Goals/focus, vision, aspiration, core values ○ Community/parent participations encouragement ○ Fund raising ○ Management of school budgets ○ School building maintenance ○ Boosting teachers' morale and security	
• What are student enrolment, retention, and completion challenges hindering primary education improvement?	○ Challenges at the community, parents, children ○ Extent to which economic, cultural, and social issues affecting student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion	

• Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Focus-group discussion questions

For teachers

Main questions	Points to be covered	Generic prompts
• What is the nature of educational disadvantage in this school?	○ Views/visions for school achievement ○ Feelings about the school, teaching job, their students, communities ○ Views about student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion rates ○ Reasons for students' un-enrolment and dropout: social, economic, cultural, personal reasons ○ Reasons related to schools and DESB ○ Views about responsibility for each of these issues ○ Expectation of students and parents ○ Knowledge about parents' perception, attitudes and beliefs about education, and their problems and needs	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you clarify a little on this? • Can you explain more clearly? • Can you tell me anything else? • Can you give me some examples?
• How do you work to improve student enrolment, retention, attainment and completion rates?	○ Teaching plans, giving and checking homework ○ Changes in teaching techniques: what results? ○ How to do if having teaching problems ○ Professional development: training, workshops, group discussion, self-reflection, school academic meetings ○ Relationships among staff and with students ○ Relationships with parents and communities · Promotion of educational benefits · Invitation of parents to school events · Reports of students' learning performance · Recognition of good students and their families	
• What are student enrolment, retention, and completion challenges hindering your school improvement?	○ Challenges at the school and for you ○ Extent to which economic, cultural, and social issues affecting student enrolment, retention, attainment, and completion	

• Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to share?

For parents

Main questions	Points to be covered	Generic prompts
• What are your views/perceptions on education?	○ Views about benefits of education ○ Expectations on child's education ○ Major topics discussed among villagers	• Can you expand a little on this? • Can you clarify a little on this? • Can you explain more clearly? • Can you tell me anything else? • Can you give me some examples?
• How do you support your children's learning?	○ Talking with children about benefits of education ○ Kind of learning assistance provided for children at home	
• What is your relationship with your children's teachers like?	○ Feelings about the school/teachers: like/dislike ○ How to know children's learning at school ○ Encouragement to participate in education activities at home and school	
• What are challenges you face in supporting your children's education?	○ Economic, cultural, and social issues ○ School-related challenges ○ Family-related challenges ○ Neighbourhood-related challenges	

Further questions for parents whose children are not in school

• Why don't your children go to school? • What cause your children to drop out of school?	○ Economic, cultural, and social issues ○ School-related causes ○ Family-related causes ○ Child-related causes ○ Neighbourhood-related causes	

• Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to share?

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