

Improving Education Access and Quality in the Lao PDR

Based on the Seven Principles of the ASEAN Declaration for Out-of-School Children

Miki Inui¹

Introduction

Despite the enormous investment to achieve Education for All (EFA) since 1990 and the contribution of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adapted in 2000 and 2015, respectively, there remain 58 million Out of School Children (OOSC) worldwide. According to UNICEF and UIS (UNESCO Institute of Statistics), OOSC is categorized into two groups, “presently out of school,” primary and secondary aged children who have been enrolled neither in primary nor lower secondary schools for more than one year, and “at risk of being out of school” (UNICEF 2015).

Among the 58 million OOSC, 3.6 million are confirmed to be in ASEAN countries. The causes for OOSC vary across different countries and regions, however, general findings indicate that girls, children from rural areas, the poor, together with religious, ethnic and handicapped minorities tend to suffer from inequities in the education system (Bloch 1991, Burger 1988, Smith 1994, Adewale & Adebawale 2008, UIS 2015). In addition, having impairments was the top reason for children with disabilities to be out of school (Plan International 2013). According to Kameyama (2018), Conflict Affected and Fragile States (CAFS) and disability have been recently recognized as characteristics of OOSC. Obviously, they are considered to be educationally disadvantaged.

To respond to the increase of OOSCY in ASEAN countries, the “ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening for OOSCY” (Out of School Children and Youth) was adapted in 2016¹. Cooperation within ASEAN countries to eliminate OOSC has been promoted, especially since the establishment of the Asian Economic Society (AEC). However, according to UNESCO (2018), a relatively larger population of OOSC is found in Indonesia (2,016,360), the Philippines (586,284), and Cambodia (184,284). Despite its small

¹ University of Hyogo, Japan

number of OOSC, 50,332, Lao PDR exhibits the third highest percentage of OOSC (6.66%) within the ASEAN countries, followed by Cambodia and Indonesia, as shown in Table 1.

Schooling is one of the best hopes for improving the life prospects of a child from a poor family and for increasing economic and social mobility and reducing poverty (King & van de Walle 2007), however, it has been difficult to reduce OOSCY, not only in ASEAN countries but worldwide, due to various kinds of barriers facing these children.

Table 1: Number and Percentage of OOSC in ASEAN countries

Country	Number of OOSC	Percentage of OOSC
Cambodia	184,824	9.44
Indonesia	2,061,360	7.27
Lao PDR	50,332	6.66
Philippines	586,284	4.51
Thailand	107,315	2.16
Vietnam	127,071	1.76
Malaysia	41,794	1.4

(UNESCO 2018)

The research question in this paper is divided into two. First, we examine the current state of OOSCY and its causes in Lao PDR. Second, we investigate to what extent the seven principles of the ASEAN Declaration (inclusivity, equality, accessibility, continuity, quality, flexibility, and sustainability) established by UNESCO have been fulfilled so as to eliminate the limited access to education. As stated, conditions and causes are predicted to be different from province to province within the country. This paper focuses on regional disparity based on the statistical data and field research.

Conceptual approach

As for the conceptual approach, the seven principles proposed by UNESCO (2018) are as follows: 1) Inclusivity: the entitlement to have access to education based on nondiscrimination and equal opportunity for all; 2) Equity: strong commitment, specific support, and resources to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access to education, participation, and learning outcomes; 3) Accessibility: access to education for all children and youth irrespective of gender, nationality, ethnicity, disability, geographic location, religion, belief, culture, social origin, and other factors; 4) Continuity: continuous education, particularly to

enable children and youth to access school, and to remain and be retained in school without dropping out; 5) Quality: effective teachers, curriculum, methodology, pedagogy, educational materials, evaluations, facilitations, and child and youth participation in cooperation with families and communities; 6) Flexibility: flexible and different pathways for learning, both formal and non-formal, academic and vocational skills, especially for those who are disadvantaged or marginalized; 7) Sustainability: education is on a continuum and part of a lifelong dynamic, a cornerstone for human development, with respect for the planet and the quest for prosperity, peace and partnership.

In this paper, these principles are organized into four categories under the agreement of a UNESCO official in Bangkok, namely, 1) Inclusivity, 2) Accessibility and 3) Equity are grouped as access to education, and 4) Continuity and 7) Sustainability are grouped as continuity. Quality in education and flexibility are considered as independent categories.

However, attention needs to be paid if these four categories are enough to investigate the state and cause of OOSCY because, from the perspective of stakeholders, their actual educational experience should be taken into consideration. Bloch (1991) indicates that school participation is the interaction of supply and demand in the learning process. Supply means the availability and quality of school facilities, material and teachers. Demand is created by parents in terms of opportunity, the cost of schooling, and the influence of cultural and religious factors. The learning process means children's experience at school. In this paper, these three factors are also examined to achieve the goal of this research.

Throughout the paper, investigating each category and its factors, by paying attention to regional characteristics, is important.

The Current situation and Government Policy regarding OOSCY

In the Lao PDR, government policy, since 1990, has focused on eliminating OOSCY, especially after participating in the World Conference for Education for All and confirmed to focus on the development of primary education. Since 1990, government policy in Lao PDR has focused on eliminating OOSCY, especially after the stage of primary education. In 1990, the term "OOSCY" did not exist, however, the government exhibited a deep concern for these children and treated them as being educationally disadvantaged. This concern has shown itself in both the education laws and the action plans for education since the 1990s.

In 1996, the government advocated the expansion of educational opportunities among ethnic minorities, and made efforts to promote their cultural heritages in

policy documents. Since then, the government has gradually implemented policies that have the stated goal of making additional educational resources available to ethnic minorities. A decree regarding compulsory education was enforced at that time because the net enrollment rate at primary school was only 68.5%. In 1998, the Ministry of Education (MOE)² conducted an overview of government policy as regards education and, as a long-term objective, promoted vocational training for women and girls, minority groups, and disadvantaged adults (Peters, 1998). Moreover, the Education Strategic Vision issued in 2000 aimed to increase the enrollment rate in primary schools by up to 90%, 95%, and 98% in 2010, 2015, and 2020, respectively.

According to the “Education for All National Plan of Action 2003-2015” (MOE & UNESCO, 2005), the priorities in the education sector were access, quality, and management for minorities, girls, and poor families, and specific goals were addressed along with the MDGs. As help from international aid was recognized as an essential strategy to develop the education sector, the Education Development Strategy Framework (EDSF) 2009-2015 was proposed in 2007 along with the revised education law, which focused on the improvement of access to education in remote areas, particularly for women, girls, and educationally disadvantaged people.

In addition, the current educational policy document entitled, “National Strategy and Plan of Action one Inclusive Education 2011-2015,” aims to eliminate disparities in educational access for disadvantaged groups (especially women and girls), ethnic groups, and people with socio-economic difficulties (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011). According to the government, through these improvements, ethnic groups and women will eventually have access to equal educational opportunities in Laos. As the current Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2016–2020 still focuses on equal access to quality education, as can be seen by statements such as “the number of learners from Early Childhood Education to lower secondary grade 9 increases with a special focus on disadvantaged learners and also by ensuring gender equity” (MOES 2015), it is possible to say that EFA has not yet been achieved in Lao PDR even though the net enrollment rate in 2018 reached 91.47%.

Previous research on OOSCY in Lao PDR

Regarding this issue, in Lao PDR, three conditions, namely children from poor rural communities, females, and minorities are considered to have high exclusion rates (King & van de Walle 2007, World Bank 2016, UNESCO 2017, Noonan, 2018). In general, as can well be imagined, children from poor families tend to be educationally disadvantaged due to economic difficulties. It especially happens in

rural areas where income generation activities are limited.

Girls and females also tend to be victims of OOSCY partly because of traditional customs. In Lao PDR, education was available for Buddhist boys it means it was not unavailable for girls (Condominas 1998, Faming 2007). It indicates that the rate of OOSC for females was higher than for males (UNESCO, 2017). In addition to this fact, ethnic minorities who live in mountainous areas tend to be classified as OOSCY due to the limited access to school, the lack of school facilities and educational resources, and language differences. As minority children speak their mother tongues, they have a hard time studying in the Lao language at school, so they tend to stay away from school (Thant & Vokes 1986, Inui 2009, ADB 2000, Berge, Chounlamany, Khoupilaphanh & Silver 2016, The United Nations in Lao PDR, 2015). Onphanhdala and Suruga (2008) report that large differences among Lao and ethnic groups can be observed in terms of repetition and late enrollment. However, those factors are similar to viewpoints highlighted in the 1980–1990s.

On the other hand, current research concerning OOSCY shows different concerns, such as dropping out of school occurs because it is too expensive to attend school, and ethnic minorities tend to have no interest in education (World Bank, 2016). These days, school enrollment fees are rising in urban areas, such as the capital, Vientiane, and some students drop out because of this reason. The low interest in education among minorities has been highlighted for quite a long time, but it is becoming more of an issue these days because the majority of Lao people have higher expectations of schooling than before. Moreover, child marriage and child labor are currently issues in remote areas (Xayavong & Pholhiru 2018, UNICEF 2020). For example, Xayavong & Pholhirul (2018) found out, as a result of quantitative analysis, that child labor, especially among girls, has a strong impact on school dropout rates. Married children also tend to receive a lower level of education compared to unmarried children. As child marriage and child labor occurs in remote mountainous areas, it could be said that ethnic minorities are easily targeted as OOSCY.

These serious issues highlighted by current researchers are totally believable, but there should exist regional differences in these factors. The view of previous research tends to observe the countrywide perspective. However, as Inui (2019) reported in the field research, there are huge regional disparities among provinces in terms of survival rates, complete school rates, drop out and repetition rates, therefore, a focus on regional disparities is needed.

UNICEF (2020) pointed out that access and completion of various levels of education highlights strong socioeconomic factors; poverty is named as a key factor contributing to inequalities. The next figure shows the rate of OOSC by province. It can be seen that there are significant disparities by provinces; for example, the capital,

Vientiane shows the lowest rate (13.4%), but Pongxaly (30.6%), Luang Namtha (25.6%) in the north, and Savannakhet (28.4%) and Saravan (23.6) in south, have much higher rates. The rate of OOSCY somehow overlaps with the poverty rate, for example, Vientiane, which shows the lowest OOSC, has the lowest poverty rate, and southern regions such as Savannakhet, Saravan, and Sekong have the highest poverty rates as shown in Figure 1.

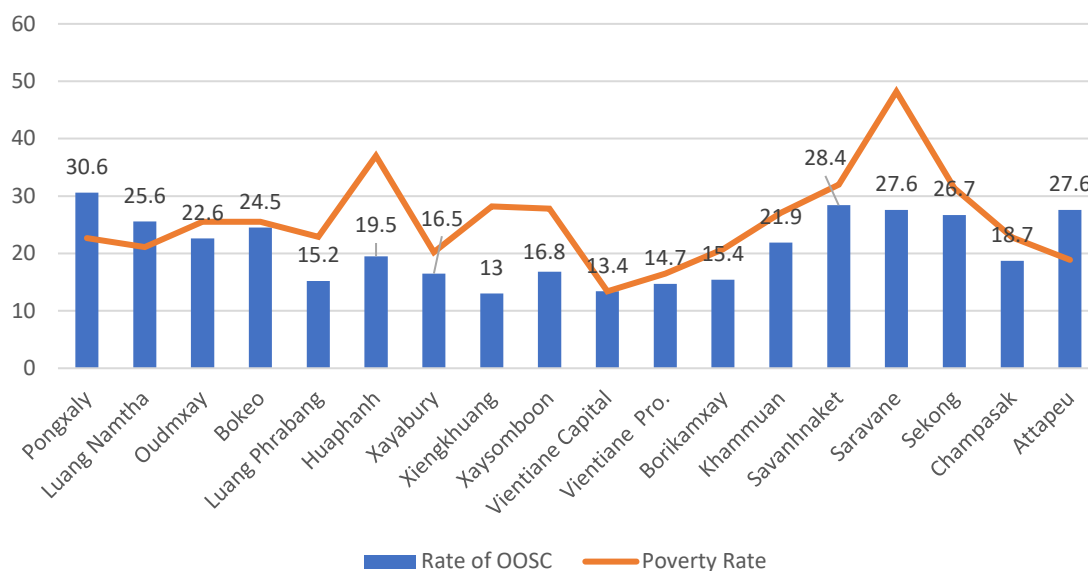


Figure 1: The Rate of OOSC by province

(Created by author based on Coulombe, Eprecht, Pimhidzai, Vilaysouk, 2016)

Research methodology

A mixed research methodology was adopted for the conduct of this research. Quantitative data was collected from the national census, education statistics, and through interviews. Education index data, such as the school attendance rate, survival rate, and dropout rate reported by each province were analyzed to assess the educational access and continuity as well as the quality.

To better understand the impact at local level, qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders who are involved in OOSCY and its educational assistance activities or programs. First of all, a formal interview was implemented by a UNESCO official in Bangkok who was involved in the “ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening for OOSCY” and created the seven principles with other international organizations. It was possible to obtain detailed information regarding the international cooperation program because UNESCO coordinates the overall OOSCY project within ASEAN countries.

Second of all, in order to investigate regional disparities, in this paper, interview data which was collected by the author from 2014–2019 was utilized. The research field was divided into three regions of Lao PDR, namely, the north, central, and south regions where the author made intermittent visits. Within these three regions, four major cities, ①Luang Namtha, ②Luang Phrabang, ③Vientiane, and ④Savannakhet were selected as the targeted fields.



Figure 2. Map of Lao PDR³

The affiliations of the interviewees varied across different research sites, but they are generally school authorities, teachers, and staff members of the Provincial Department of Education, the Department of Labor and Social Welfare, and international NGOs (INGO) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Research sites and interviewees

Region	Research Site	Interviewees	Major questions
North	① Luang Namtha (2019) ⁴	PESS, Primary school teachers, villagers	1.Current state/local aspects of OOSCY and its cause.
	② Luang Phrabang (2015-2019)	PESS, DESB, teachers (special education school, village school)	
Central	③ Vientiane (2018-19)	MOES (Inclusive Education), RIES, UNICEF, WFP, INGOs, AusAID	2.Internal/External assistance for OOSCY.
South	④ Savannakhet (2014,2018)	DESB, Villagers, PLSW	

PESS: Provincial Department of Education and Sports Services⁵

DESB: District Education and Sports Bureau

MOES: Ministry of Education and Sports

RIES: Research Institute for Education

INGOs: DVV International, AFESHIP (Laos)

PLSW: Provincial Department of Labor and Social Welfare.

In addition, observations in local primary schools in each field were conducted along with the interviews to examine the quality of the education. In the school observations, various factors were examined such as the condition of teachers, timetable, use of the textbook, classroom facilities, and the language use of both teachers and students.

Fry, Bi, and Apahung (2018), who examined the state and the cause of educational disparity in Thailand, stated that utilizing both a quantitative and a qualitative approach would be needed to analyze the current state of education and suggest solutions.

Results

Who is the most disadvantaged?

In response to the first research question, the most disadvantaged groups are girls, ethnic minorities, and children from rural and poor families, as previous research has pointed out. However, as a result of qualitative research, a hidden group—children with disabilities (hereafter, CWD)—was considered to be the most disadvantaged and to have the least access to school.

An interview with MOES (Department of Inclusive Education) showed that the total number of CWD is unknown due to a lack of data, however, most CWD in remote areas have extremely limited access to schools, because only two special educational schools are available for disabled children in the entire country (two schools for blind and deaf children in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang)⁶. Since the School for the Deaf and Blind in Savannakhet was closed due to budgetary shortages, children with these specific disabilities need to attend boarding school in either of the above-mentioned cities. However, access is not guaranteed to every CWD because not every family prefers to send their children to boarding school, particularly if they are too young. Besides, the distances from rural areas to the two schools are too far. According to one interviewee, a teacher in the special school in Luang Phrabang, there are about seventy students from northern provinces, but they are fortunate to be there, as many parents disagree about sending them to the school due to their limited financial resources and the cost of transportation from the rural provinces to the school. This situation prevents countless CWD from attending school. A member of staff who

Figure 3: Students at the Deaf School



retired from MOES and works at an international organization mentioned that, despite the lack of exact data, 15% to 20% of OOSCY in Lao PDR are considered to be disabled children. It is obvious that more special educational schools need to be established in each region.

Kameyama (2018) pointed out that disabled children make up one of the recently recognized groups of OOSCY, and they should be particularly cared for by the education sector in Lao PDR, because this invisible group has the right to receive an education, but is the last group to have access to school.



Figure 4: Dormitory of the Deaf School (Luang Phrabang)

Examining Four Categories and three factors

Access

As has been discussed in previous research and shown in Figure 1, “The rate of OOSC by province,” access to education has not been achieved in Lao PDR. The most notable problem is a significant disparity among the provinces. Other data, besides the rate of OOSC, also indicate inequality in education and uneven enrollment. For example, the “rate of never been school,” which was reported by the national census (2015) and “gross enrollment rate in lower secondary school,” shown in Table 3, both prove the disparities.

Table 3: Education data regarding access to education by target provinces (%)

	Rate of never been to school (above 6 years of age)	Gross enrollment rate (Lower secondary)
Luang Namtha	27.3	73.1
Luang Phrabang	14.2	84.2
Vientiane	2.4	92.4
Savannakhet	18.4	58.8
Lao PDR	13.1	74.4

(Lao Statistics Bureau, Lao EDUInfo 2015)

The table indicates that the rate of “never been to school” is the lowest in the capital, Vientiane (2.4%). Luang Phrabang (14.2%) and Savannakhet (18.4 %) have higher rates than the national average (13.1%). The rate in Luang Namtha (27.3%) is the highest and it means this province has the least access to education in lower secondary school. The infrastructure of school buildings and classrooms shows significant differences as shown the photos.



Figure 5: Building of a private school



Figure 6: Inside of the private school (Vientiane)



Figure 7: Akha village in the hillside



Figure 8: School of Akha minority (Luang Namtha)

Figure 9 shows the data by provinces more clearly. The figure divides school attendance (more than 6 years old) into three categories, which are “never been to school,” “currently at school,” and “attended before.” It is clear to see the difference between Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Namtha in terms of the status of “never attended” and “attended before.”

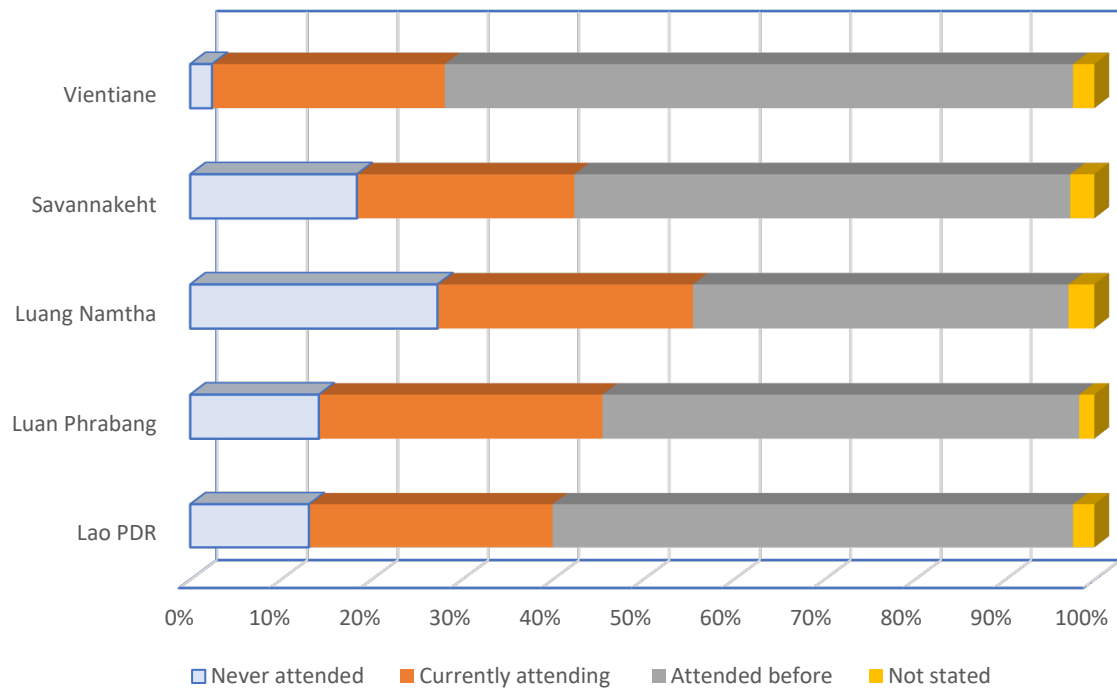


Figure 9. School attendance by target provinces (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015)

Moreover, as shown in Table 3, the gross enrollment rate in lower secondary school shows the lowest rate (58.5%) in Savannakhet, which means access to lower secondary education is extremely limited compared to Vientiane (92.4%). Luang Namtha has a rate of 73.1 % but is still lower than the national average (74.4%). From these data, it can be concluded that only the capital, Vientiane has achieved access to education even at secondary level.

Qualitative research also reported the difficulty of access to education. An interview with the Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) in Luang Namtha showed that a major reason for lack of access to education is the long distance to schools in mountainous areas, especially where minorities reside. The number of schools is limited in remote areas where the Department of Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) has faced severe budgetary shortages and a lack of educational resources. Besides, in those areas, parents and students do not have much motivation to engage with and understand education, because a family in poverty tends to struggle to meet the costs. An interview with the Provincial Department of Labor and Social Welfare (PLSW) in Savannakhet shared a similar viewpoint in terms of family poverty due to the limited agricultural industry, and a long distance to travel to schools in mountainous areas. Moreover, children with special needs, especially deaf and blind students, have no option to attend school except through boarding school in Luang Phrabang which would require a drive of 5–6 hours. Reflecting on these three factors, Bloch (1991) highlighted that none of the factors supply sufficiently, and the demand and learning process are not achieved.

Continuity

Likewise with access to school, “continuity” has not been achieved in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. As Table 4 shows, the survival rate in primary school (those who reached the final grade) is the highest in Vientiane as can be imagined. Luang Phrabang (81.1%) and Luang Namtha (87.0%) exceed the national average (78.3%), but Savannakhet is inferior to the average. Survival rate is linked to the shortage of schools (complete school) because children can neither finish nor continue their education if there are no schools near their homes. These data somehow overlap with the dropout rate, for example, Vientiane shows the lowest dropout rate (3.9%), and the highest is in Savannakhet (8.3%).

Table 4: Education data regarding continuity of education (2014)

	Survival rate (Primary school)	Dropout Rate (Lower Secondary school)
Luang Namtha	87.0	6.2
Luang Phrabang	81.1	6.4
Vientiane	93.0	3.9
Savannakhet	72.2	8.3
Lao PDR	78.3	6.3

(Lao EDUInfo, 2015)

The factors causing dropout differ among the provinces. According to the DESB in Luang Phrabang, which shows the second highest dropout rate, students in remote areas tend to drop out if transportation is not available because it is hard to walk a long distance. On another hand, in Vientiane, a staff from an NGO said that students drop out even in the city center due to the high enrollment fees (about 40 USD in public secondary schools and 400 USD in upper secondary school). This shows the causes of dropout differ among the regions.

Reflecting on the previous research, poverty, taking care of siblings, and child labor were the major reasons for dropout, but there is a different tendency in Savannakhet. As shown in the map (Figure 1), Savanakheth is located across the Mekong river from Thailand, where the minimum wage is three times higher than Lao PDR. Therefore, migration labor, working in factories or rice fields, and returning home on a daily basis, are common in this area. As this lifestyle encourages young people to earn cash rather than studying at school, they quit their education and engage in earning cash in Thailand. Reflecting these situation, currently, avoiding human-trafficking is one of the major issue in cross-border areas.

**Figure 10:** Cross-border workers**Figure 11:** Warning sign in the border area
(Savannakhet, Thailand-Laos border)

Also, the data regarding dropout obtained from PESS in Luang Namtha shows the negative aspect of rural areas. Figure 3 shows the number of dropout students in primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary level. Number of dropout students have decreased in the primary education level, but those of secondary level have increased significantly.

As is clear, the number of dropout students exceeded 1,000 in 2017 and 2018. As regards the reason, a PESS officer indicated that students cannot continue their education because of the lack of schools and dormitories. The officer said that even though students enroll in the school in the first year, they gradually drop out when they have difficulties commuting to school. Also, poverty and parents' low understanding of education can be factors causing dropout. These results conclude that the reasons behind OOSCY differ greatly in different regions. It means that supply and demand has not been achieved in terms of access to education.

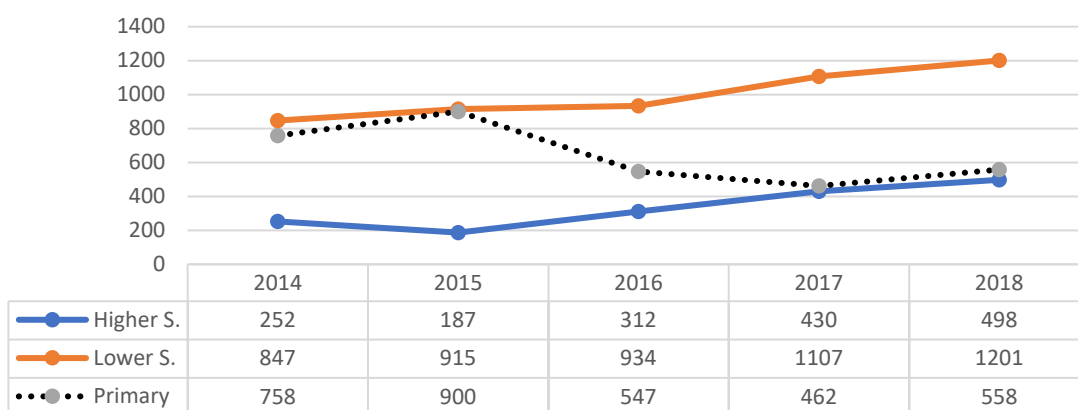


Figure 12: Number of dropout students in Luang Namtha Province

(Data obtained from PESS, Luang Namtha)

Quality

The quality of education is potentially the most serious issue and is an extremely difficult barrier to overcome. Quality is evident through statistics such as student-teacher ratio, average class size, teachers' salaries, instruction time, and learning outcomes. In this research, the learning outcomes (test scores in Lao language and mathematics) are used to establish the differences.

Figure 4 shows the proficiency levels associated with benchmarks based on the national assessment test (ASLO) in the Lao language conducted in 2013.

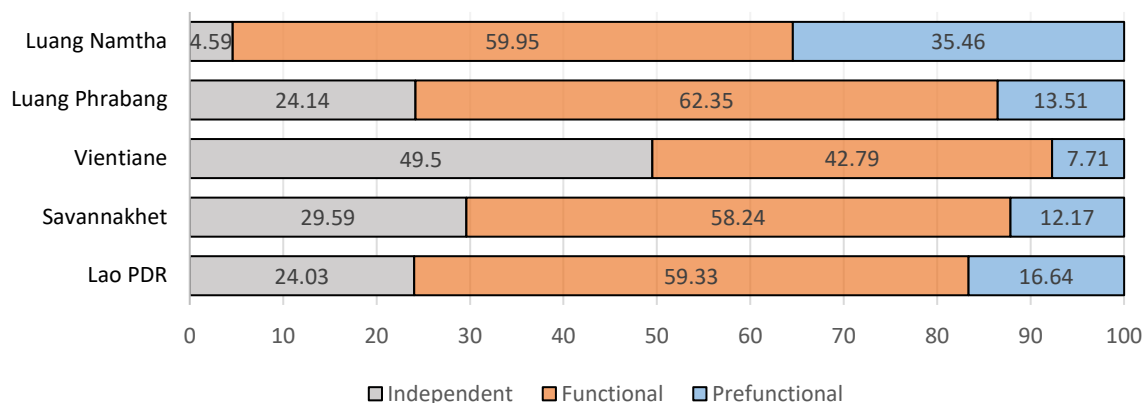


Figure 13: Percentages of students at three benchmarks by target provinces

(Created by the author from MOES&RIES 2014)

It is obvious that the rate labeled “Independent,” enabling independent learning, is lowest in Luang Namtha (4.59%), and highest in Vientiane (49.5%). The disparity between these two provinces is significant, namely, the province with a higher minority rate has the highest level of disadvantage⁷.

Regarding “Pre-functional,” meaning a student has not reached the minimum level for a functional purpose in Lao Society, this is highest in Luang Namtha (35.46%) and lowest in Vientiane (7.71%). This means that the quality of education differs significantly among the regions.

Observations and interviews in public primary schools in Luang Namtha and Luang Phrabang indicated the presence of underprivileged conditions, from poor school infrastructures, to a lack of quality in other areas such as the distribution of textbooks, the lack of educational materials, less instruction time, and the poor qualifications of teachers.



Figure 14. Lanten minority school
(Luang Namtha)



Figure 15: Khamu minority school
(Luang Phrabang)

In a Lenten minority (subgroup of Akha) village school of Luang Namtha, about 20 km from the center, students use old textbooks from 2011, and only three teachers are available to teach about seventy students. The classes are managed by having different grades in the same group (grades 1 to 2 and 3 to 4 study together). Most students never communicated in the Lao language with the author because they felt embarrassed to talk in a language other than their mother tongue. Another village in Luang Phrabang, about 50 km from the center, had a similarly disadvantaged situation in terms of instruction time and teachers' qualifications. In the village, old textbooks were used, and instruction time was limited. For example, 30 hours per week (6 hours a day) are allocated in the school, the same as for the Lenten minority school (Table 5). In Akha village in Luang Namtha, there were no classes on Friday afternoons, because the teacher wanted to return to her hometown at the weekend.

On the other hand, there were 35 hours (7 hours a day) allocated in a school located in town (Table 6). In this school, most students belong to a majority group, the Lao. A difference can be seen in the teaching subjects. In the town school, more important subjects such as Math, Lao language, and the World Around Us (Science & Social studies) are taught. Math is even taught in French, shown as Math(F) in the table, because the school is a public school selected to teach the French language⁸.

Table 5: Timetable of a Rural Lenten Village in Luang Namtha (grades 3–4)

	G	1	2	3	4	5	6
M	3	Raising Flag	Math	Lao Language	PE	Music	Moral Ed
	4		WAU		Lao Language		
T	3	Math		Lao	Lao Language	P.E.	WAU
	4			Writing			
W	3	WAU		Lao Language		Drawing	Math
	4			English			
T	3	Math		Lao	Lao Language	P.E.	Lao Language
	4			Writing			
F	3	English		Craft		Home Room	Clean Classroom
	4	Math					

Table 6: Timetable of a Town School in Luang Phrabang (4th grade)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
M	French		Lao Language		WAU		P.E.
Tu	Math (F)	Lao Language	Math		English	Moral Ed.	Craft
W	Math (F)		Lao Language		Math		Drawing
Th	Math		French		WAU		Clean Classroom
F	Math (F)		Lao Language		Drawing	Lowering Flag	

*Math(F) Mathematics taught in French language

(Created by author based on the school observation)

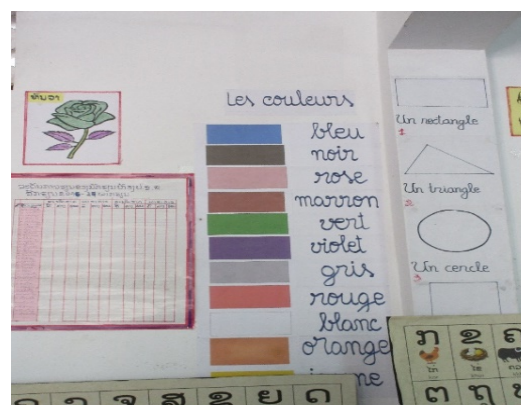


Figure 16: Physical education class in a town school **Figure 17:** French words in the classroom
(Luang Phrabang)

In general, DESB determines the timetable for each school, however, according to the teachers who were interviewed for this research, the schools are able to change the learning content according to local characteristics and the availability of teachers.

The difference in teaching quality among the provinces was notable. There was found to be quite a number of volunteer teachers in the three provinces except in Vientiane. They do not usually take home a salary and start to work until they become full time teachers. This is because the Lao government sets the number of public officers at 1,800 as a consequence of a lack of budget. Therefore, approximately 10,000 volunteer teachers work unpaid until the local government (PESS) admits them as full time teachers. The author visited three schools in the rural villages of Luang Phrabang and found one or two volunteer teachers among five to six teachers in the schools. The volunteer teachers lived in shabby, simple houses and were provided with rice and vegetables by the villagers. These living and working

conditions do not encourage people to enter teaching and this also has a negative impact on the academic achievement of students. This shows that besides the factors of supply and demand, the learning process, which directly impacts on quality, has not been achieved as desired.

Flexibility

Reflecting the research objective, to investigate to what extent the seven principles of the ASEAN Declaration (categorized into access, continuity, quality, and flexibility) have been fulfilled, none of the categories have yet been achieved. However, the last category, flexibility, which guarantees different pathways of learning styles for marginalized or disadvantaged groups, seems to have been successfully fulfilled in Lao PDR.

As previously discussed in this paper, budget shortages were the biggest barrier to eliminating OOSCY in Lao PDR, however, regional cooperation within ASEAN countries, international projects by International NGOs, help from aid agencies, as well as small-sized projects, have enabled children to continue their education. For instance, at the regional level of ASEAN, a “Regional Equivalency Program,” which aims to eliminate OOSCY, is ready to be carried out under the coordination of UNESCO. According to UNESCO Bangkok, donors from governments such as Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia support OOSCY in advocacy, capacity building, data analysis, and monitoring. In addition to this, various kinds of education projects to eliminate OOSCY have been carried out. Currently BEQUAL (Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR) coordinated by AusAid and the European Union is a major project that is trying to improve participation and access to primary education by constructing schools, revising textbooks, building the capacity of local government officers, and offering different educational activities at a local level. International NGOs, such as DVV International have played key roles to eliminate OOSC by offering literacy course, mathematics classes vocational education as well as building communication skills (DVV International 2018).

Moreover, UNESCO has implemented a “Primary Equivalency Program” in Lao PDR, which assists children who did not finish their primary education. This program concentrates a three-year educational curriculum (grades 3 to 5) into a two-year program and offers after-school study. Currently, 6,000 students are targeted in this program and teachers obtain extra payment, nearly 100USD per month, by being involved in this project. According to UNESCO, this project is financed by the non-formal education sector, therefore, obtaining a budget was relatively easy compared to the general education sector whose budget has been continuously limited. By continuing these projects, different pathways and learning styles are guaranteed

within the country⁹.

The local government has also made efforts to assist OOSCY by collaborating with NGOs so that they can open different pathways to continue children's education. For example, PESS in Luang Namtha accepted OOSCY in the Technical Training Center and teaches young people how to grow vegetables and raise chickens, and other skills for those students who have a mechanical aptitude, by utilizing the vocational education budget. In the school for the deaf and blind in Luang Phrabang, teachers were sent to Thailand to learn sign language with the help of World Vision. And in Savannakhet, international NGOs such as AFESHIP and World Vision provide migrant children with an anti-human trafficking program and vocational training to support OOSCY. They might take risks or face poverty in the future. Taking these positive aspects into consideration, supply and demand, and the learning process have achieved success at micro and macro level.

Conclusion

There were two objectives in this research. The first was to examine the current state of OOSCY and its causes in Lao PDR. The results indicated that despite the national policy, substantial efforts on behalf of the government, and international aid, eliminating OOSCY has faced difficulties because the current situation is very complex. As was discussed in this paper, catering for invisible students such as CWD in remote areas, or migrant children in Lao-Thai border areas, will be a requirement. They are regarded as the final group of OOSCY, therefore, as King & van de Walle (2017) pointed out, considering the specific constraints and needs facing each group will be a priority to help these disadvantaged children. In addition, understanding regional disparities, from both quantitative and qualitative points of view, will be needed as the research results have proved. Reflecting on the current disparities and limited resources, providing equal opportunities in the entire country is hard to imagine, however, reducing regional disparities will give students the opportunity to realize their potential and talent (Fry et al., 2018).

The second objective was to investigate to what extent the seven principles (which were categorized into access, continuity, quality, flexibility) were fulfilled. As a result of examining these categories, only flexibility was successfully achieved with the help of an enormous number of international projects. However, other principles such as access, equality, and quality were not achieved, under extremely difficult conditions, especially in remote areas. From the aspect of quality, various kinds of disadvantaged situations were observed, and the situation yielded a negative impact on academic achievement.

The reason why flexibility was achieved was because the assisting organizations

utilized the budget from other sectors, such as non-formal and vocational sectors, instead of the general education sector which has suffered severe budget shortages. Therefore, as shown in the interview results, seeking a budget in available sectors in accordance with regional and local needs is an effective strategy to eliminate OOSCY. Moreover, raising awareness of education at a local level and training local staff to build on their technical skills will also be required because local understanding of education is low and response to local staff is too slow, especially in remote areas. This situation has resulted in poor access and a low quality of education for a number of years. As educating OOSCY leads to economic gain and produces a wide range of non-market benefits (Coloumbe, Epprecht et al., 2016, Burnett & Thomas 2013), advocating the necessity of education at micro-level, and also a stronger network formation, and regional cooperation at macro level, is necessary to eliminate OOSCY, not only in Lao PDR, but in other developing countries.

¹ The declaration was drafted with inputs from ASEAN member states and subsequently endorsed by all member countries at the ASEAN Summit in September 2016 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. In 2017, UNICEF and UNESCO supported ASEAN to organize a regional workshop on strengthening education for OOSCY in Bangkok. ASEAN's commitment to strengthen education for OOSCY was reiterated when attending representatives re-affirmed their intent to realize the Declaration in 2019 and beyond (UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2018) .

² MOE was renamed as the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in 2011.

³ Cited from Big Brothers Mouse (http://www.bigbrothermouse.com/images/laos_map.gif).

⁴ The years in brackets are when the research was mainly conducted. Co-researchers conducted research in Savannakhet to follow up the previous research. The research term is different in each site, but usually lasts 4 to 5 days.

⁵ PESS are established in each province and are responsible for secondary education and technical & vocational education in terms of education development and planning, budget control and supply for teachers. DEBS which established in each district have overall responsibilities for pre-primary education, primary education and non-formal education. These decentralization systems started in 2000, however, the proceeding process has not been successful due to the weak capacity of local government staffs.

⁶ According to MOES, there are no special schools for physically and mentally disabled children. If public schools will not accept them, they have no choice but to stay at home, especially in rural areas.

⁷ In Luang Namtha, according to the Population Census of 2015 (Lao Statistics Bureau), Aka and Khmou have the highest percentage of ethnic groups (each 25%). Lue (10%) and Hmong (7%) are also considered as major groups. The data was obtained by official request, not from a website.

⁸ The total number of hours spent studying math and Lao language are 11 hours and 7 hours, respectively. On the other hand, in the Lenten school, the total number of hours for each is 7 hours (4th grade). The reason that the Lenten village has a Lao writing class is that they are one of the ethnic minorities who do not speak the Lao language.

⁹ Other than in Lao PDR, UNESCO also offers "Leaning Csoin Project for Migrant Children" in Myanmar/Thailand border because migrant children tend to be OOSCY due to the stateless situation. The project cashes out to the parents based on the amount of children's reading by utilizing the smart phone.

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