

Mori Grant Report

- **Thesis Title:** Whose Decision Matters?: - Dropout Issue in Primary Education in Laos
- **Student Name:** Gnangnouvong Itthida, 81449265
3rd year doctoral student, Human Security and Communication Program
- **Thesis Adviser:** Michio Umegaki, PhD

Research Content:

Primary school dropout has been a persistent problem for Laos (low survival rate to grade 5 slightly over 50% for more than the past 10 years). This problem is particularly critical in rural areas where the majority of population is still living near the subsistence level. Here, we were reported that the migration to Vientiane and Thailand are one of the major factors. To address the problem, narrowly defined as a low graduation rate, in 2009, Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP) was introduced to allow students to proceed to higher grades without final exam. This, however, overlooked one serious problem: graduation alone is not strong enough as an incentive for the children to stay in school, causing absence, and lack of continuation in classes. To conclude, this method has resulted in the increase in dropout and the decline in the graduation rate.

Activity Conducted:

- **Methodology:** In-depth interviews and participatory observation.
- **Venue:** A comparative study (1. Pakngum, 2. Naxaithong and 3. Sisatanak in Vientiane, Laos, where having primary dropout rate of 10.6%, 12% and 4.8% respectively).
 - **Date:** 06 Aug 2015 – 31 Aug 2015.
 - **Informants:** 25 respondents (education ministry officials, teachers, parents and students).

Research Outcomes:

Below is the reproduction of an article accepted under the review of the Journal of Human Security Studies Autumn 2016, with necessary modification to fit in the style of this report.

Reasons of going to, dropping out and resuming school

School for the educational officials is a place for students to be trained academically. Parents are the actors who need to assure that this duty will be fulfilled. However, schools could also be viewed by the parents as a safe place for their children to stay when they are busy working. On the other hand, as for children, beside studying, schools could simply be a place where they can interact with their friends and discover new things together. When they have no need to provide labor force at the farm, they go to school like many children in the neighborhood.

Regardless of the important role of school, when families need to respond to secure the household economy, children need to forgo the choice of schooling. They were asked to dropout to provide labor helping on the farm, especially during the harvesting time, or to take care of the younger siblings and sometimes to follow parents to work elsewhere. Especially when the parents do not have an exact plan to come back. Staying together is another priority for them.

However, whenever the students are not preoccupied with the work. They do return to school to meet with their friends and to be back to the environment where they can have fun. It is surprising that actually these returning students are not being mentioned in any educational report before. Therefore, there has not been any policy to support the returning students, thereby rendering them with no assistance to resume school. As a result, they do have problems of catching up with the content of the classes. According to the principle teacher of Natarm Primary School, returning students are usually ending up being the poor performers of each class.

PPP, the incentive from the government for the students to stay on at school and the outcome

PPP was introduced in the end of 2009 to allow students to advance to the next classes progressively. Regardless of the results of chapter-end tests and marks obtained in the personal record. Hence, students can move to higher grades. The idea is to encourage the students to remain in school and graduate the primary school within 5 years.

In reality, however, PPP resulted in the opposite outcome it ends up bringing the incentive for the parents to take the children out of school and put them back when they are not occupied. Parents feel less pressure not to take their children to school. This is because PPP has loosen the 'rules of school'. For example the lack of attention to the student is attendance and efforts makes resuming easier than before. The returning students do not need to repeat the grade where they were, but can be moved up with their classmates.

Keo (10 years old, grade 4) is a son of a family who rely on the rice farming for household consumption. Because the family does not have enough capital to hire labor, Keo was used to be asked to leave school during the harvest time, which usually takes 2 weeks. However, later the parents started to also ask him for other process of the farming. Another case is Dork Huk, an 11 years old student, her parents were farmers and during the non-cultivation time, they often go to Thailand to do piece job for extra income. When parents go to Thailand, Dork Huk stayed with her grandparents going to school regularly. After PPP, her parents sometime take her out of school and follow them to Thailand. When she was in grade 2, she followed her parents to Thailand and stay as long as one year. Dok Huk returned to school, without the need to repeat grade 2, she was placed to grade 3.

Despite the interval of their absences, the students were placed in the higher grades. However, there is no remedial classes to support these returning students in particularly and other poor performers before schools start. None of the 53 primary schools in Pak Ngum could provide the remedial classes. Some schools like Ban Phao and Ban Hai Primary School, provided extra lessons during the school academic year, but only the main subjects (mathematics and Lao language). In other schools such as Ban Mak Nao and Ban Natarm Primary School, teachers mainly gave the students homework as a way to improve their performances. Phonemy, teacher at Natarm Village said, parents need to make sure the students do their homework, otherwise, the performances of the students will not be improved.

Although teachers play an important role in promoting children schooling, teaching is one of the many concern in their daily life. Due to the lack of budget allocated from the central government, remedial classes cannot be implemented. This is because of the low paid salary of teachers (80USD to 100USD) that leads them to look for other side jobs such as farming and selling food at the market. Therefore, providing remedial classes without extra payment could be a real burden for the teachers, who also need to secure their household needs.

Regardless of what the officials, teachers and parents are preoccupied, with PPP students are left with minimum help. As seen in the case of Keo, when he resumed school, without planned assistance from school, Keo cannot follow the content of the class and his overall performance has been

remaining poor. However, it is more problematic for the students who have left school for a longer period of time.

The majority of the returnees come to school without remembering the previous lessons they had learnt when they were at school. Furthermore, many of them had lost their study habits. Therefore, for them, the materials presented in their new class were entirely new and unfamiliar. Especially the returnees who had stayed for a year in Thailand, they even became accustomed to speaking Thai. As evidenced by the case of Dork Huk, she was expecting to return to school to have the same environment as before, but was exposed to a totally new environment, where she could not compete with the classmate, finally she had to drop out from school for the second time.

Six out of ten returning students (one and more years of absence) in the seven visited schools, dropout from school for the second time for not being able to pick up the content of the lesson. Buabane serves as another case study. She is 13 year old, she went to Natarm Primary School. Her parents migrated to work in Thailand when she was in Grade 2. Buabane was asked to leave with her parents and stayed there for two years. When the family returned to the community, Buabane returned to school, under PPP, she did not repeat Grade 2 and 3 but was placed in Grade 4. However without receiving the preparation to resume, the lessons were completely new to her. After being at school for several months, she could not survive the difficulties of learning. This discouraged her from staying in school and quitting school again and never return.

What was found to be more serious is that when the returning students dropout for the second time, none has returned to school again. Based on the fieldwork, the first reason are the students expecting to go back to the environment where they used to have fun and enjoy to stay, which is one of their schooling needs. Another is to receive the learning based on their ability. But with the unsuitable lesson to their level, with minimum help from teachers, school is not a place where they can enjoy anymore and this drives them to have the only choice, dropout. This explains the puzzle why the dropout was not improved regarding the introduction of PPP.

PPP, a misplaced policy

PPP helps to improve the overall performance of schools (reducing repetition rate and over-aged students in classes), however, not the individuals. Throughout the academic, there have been actually student's dropout and resuming school. Without the remedial classes, these students fail to catch up, resulting in having poor performance and get discouraged to stay on at school. Leaving dropout as their only choice. What poses a more difficult problem is when they quit in the second time, they will not come back to school again. Because of the reason, PPP failed to improve the dropout problem, consequently the primary school survival rate failed to meet the goal of 95% by 2015 with only 78% (MOES, 2016).