MONEY ALONE CANNOT SOLVE EVERYTHING: A STUDY OF DONOR AID TO EDUCATION REFORM IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

by

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ABSTRACT

The starting point for the study is concern for the quality of education available to the rural child in Lao PDR. Donor agencies are supporting the Government of Lao in the process of education reform and the study investigates the impact of those interventions, exploring how education policy becomes practice in the small, poor, socialist, south-east Asian country of Lao PDR. Using a variety of research methodologies based in critical ethnography and including interviews and observations, the study explores some significant discourses that go to make up the overall discourse of donor supported education reform. A contention of the study is meanings and understandings and ultimately changed practice are generated in action and reaction between constituent discourses with policy impact the result of interactions between these discourses. These interactions occur at a number of levels and in a range of contexts. Attention is given to the use and impact of a concept commonly utilised in the discourse of development aid, 'capacity development', and the study questions the inexplicit manner of its use and its negative connotation. Data inspection for this study is based in Fairclough's procedures for critical discourse analysis, with adaptation for use in the particular social, political, cultural and language contexts of Lao PDR. This was found to offer useful procedures for following policy into practice and explaining failure and success in implementation of policy at classroom level. The study is also able to question how far either research or policy is emancipatory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BEDP	Basic Education Development Project
BEd	Bachelor of Education
CD	Capacity Development
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CTA	Theory of Communicative Action
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DD	Deputy Director
DEB	District Education Bureau
DEO	District Education Officer
DP	Development Partner
ECOSOC	(United Nations) Economic and Social Council
EFA	Education For All
EG	Ethnic Groups
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EQIP II	Second Education Quality Improvement Project
ESDF	Education Sector Development Framework
ESQAC	Education Sector Quality Assurance Centre
ESWG	Education Sector Working Group
EU	European Union
FTI-CF	Fast Track Initiative Catalytic Fund
GEGDAP	Gender and Ethnic Group Action Plan
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GoL	Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDF	Ideological Discursive Formations'
IE	Inclusive Education
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
Lao PDR	Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LSE	Lower Secondary Education

MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MTEF	Mid term Expenditure Framework
NER	National Enrolment Rate
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NUOL	National University of Lao
PA	Professional Assistant
PES	Provincial Education Service
PM	Prime Minister
SDP	Sector Development Programme
SWAP	Sector Wide Approach
SWG	Sectoral Working Groups
TA	Technical Assistant/Technical Assistance
TCA	Theory of Communicative Action
TESAP	Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan
TMIS	Teacher Management Information System
TUP	Teacher Upgrading Programme
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
	United Nations Economic and Social Council
UNESO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USD	United States Dollar
USE	Upper Secondary Education
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee
WAU	World About Us
WB	World Bank

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF THE STUDY AND NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

1.0   Overview of the chapter

The general area of the study is international donor aid to education reform in developing countries, with particular reference to the one country of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)[1]. This chapter is the first of three which set the context, methodology and theoretical orientation of the study. The first chapter investigates the genesis of the study and its national and international contexts; the second establishes the ontological, epistemological and practical contexts of study and their influence on the study design and the third identifies supportive literature and theoretical contexts.

In the first section of the chapter, I reflect on how the study came about and my motivation for undertaking it. In the second, I give some information about the national and international contexts of the study and go on to look at the researcher's relationship to the contexts of study. I finish by giving the overall purpose of the study and its structure.

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[1] Lao PDR is used because it is preferred by the Lao Government. The alternative name Laos is used by some commentators, including Phraxavong (2009) and Evans (1999).

1.1   The origins of the study

As I was writing this study (Oct 2010), I received an email from a good friend working as an international technical assistant in Lao PDR. After a general description of frustrations she was experiencing, she wrote, *'Good ol' Lao, nice to visit - impossible to get anything done'*. The comment illustrates a general perception by international personnel that change is hard to bring about in Lao PDR. It is my own observation that education reform is not bringing about real and lasting change to education systems, in the context of the amount of money spent and the expertise engaged.

I undertook this study as a means to understand better some of the issues, ambiguities and general discomfort I have met in my work as a consultant providing technical assistance to education reform in Lao PDR. The research took place over a period of five years, starting in 2005 and therefore takes place as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Accord (2008) are being adopted into the discourse of development worldwide. The Education for All (EFA) Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) also provide drivers of change in Lao PDR. My experience suggests that the relationship between donor aid and the change it brings is not straightforward and the process is not clearly understood. The first part of the study title, *'Money Alone Cannot Solve Everything'* is a comment by Lao official of a bilateral donor on education reform in Lao PDR. He drew my attention to the fact that education reform is not just a matter of increased funding, but a more complex issue set in political, social and

cultural contexts. The view resonates with that of Mosse (2004: 639) who acknowledges the existence of '*the black box of unknowing between development policy and its effects'*.

1.1.1 The selection of Lao PDR as the research site

To undertake this study it was necessary to have both some insight into the country and its culture and to have contacts who can facilitate the study process. I have worked intermittently in education in Lao PDR over a period of twenty years, and built some knowledge of the country and its culture and have friends and contacts without whom the study could not have taken place.

The starting point for the study is the recognition that the current discourses of education reform and the interventions they generate in Lao PDR are not as effective as they should or could be and that the outcome of schooling both from the point of view of the child and the society is not as good as it may be. The view springs from my own experience and is supported by the work of Phraxayavong (2009:18), who has written a detailed history of development aid to Lao PDR, and suggests that development aid, in particular aid in the form of loans, has failed to bring about a required level of change and moreover has created a *'dependency trap which allows donors to leverage Lao policy'*. The reality of donor leverage and its means are of interest to this study. More specific to this research, a recent study)[2] (mid 2010) undertaken by the newly created Education Sector Quality Assurance Centre (ESQAC) of the Lao Ministry of Education (MoE) has collected

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[2] As yet unpublished

data on children's achievement and attempted to identify the real problems faced by teachers and children in rural primary schools. A significant finding is the very low academic achievement of children in rural areas of Lao PDR, even after in-service re-training of teachers.

1.2   The national and international contexts of the study

It is common, if not compulsory, for technical assistance (TA) consultants to start a report with a brief overview of the situation in the country of intervention. The similarity of content from document to document suggests that a great deal of cutting and pasting goes on, and that the consultant (I have done this myself) regards this as a chore rather than an important aspect of the report. However, recognising that some potential audiences for this writing are likely to have little knowledge of education in Lao PDR, I write this section in some depth, drawing on information from the MoE, and that of Evans (1999), who has written extensively about Lao culture and society, as well as the previously mentioned Phraxayavong (2009). More importantly I also recognise an ethnographic approach to the study implies information grounded in a series of contexts (see in particular the work of Gumperez and Hymes [1972], Schieffelin and Ochs [1986] and Halliday and Hasan [1989]). The study is based in the belief that education reform is embedded in broader social contexts, goals and cultural practices and that examination of grounded examples can lead to greater understanding of broader social practices. In this circumstance, contexts are not regarded as external influences or constraints but act as the agencies which pattern social and

power relationships. This provides the rationale for detailed attention to the many contexts of the study in the first three chapters.

1.2.1 National contexts

Lao PDR is a country of 6.1[3] million people with a projection of 7.7 million in 2020. 40.8%[4] of the population is under 15 years of age, necessitating, in the next years, expansion of the education services with consequent increased demand on services and resources. Nearly three quarters of the population live by farming, much at subsistence level. Poverty is particularly severe and countrywide, with 40% of the children underweight at the age of 5[5].

Lao PDR was labelled a least developed country by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1971 and is set amid the large and fast developing neighbours of Vietnam, China and Thailand. China is investing heavily in Lao PDR. It has played the role of wicked uncle in the past but now is courting the Government. Education becomes an important tool for wielding influence and cultivating up and coming Lao PDR leaders, exerted largely by providing scholarships and educational, vocational and ideological training. This role was taken by Vietnam in the recent past, and their influence is still considerable. All high party officials spend six months in Vietnam for political training and less elevated officials are offered scholarships and study visits. There is also direct impact on education. The Vietnamese build model schools in Lao PDR and

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[3] Source: 2007 data reported in UNDP Human Development Report 2009
[4] Source : CIA World Fact Book
[5] Source: UNDP Human Development Index 2009

provide low cost technical support. Both China and Vietnam are listed as members of a joint donor/MoE Education Sector Working Group (ESWG), but representatives have never attended. India and South Korea are also absent members. Most importantly, investment/aid to Lao PDR from both China and Vietnam comes without the pre-conditions towards human rights, political change and good governance that are the overt texts of other donors' agendas (Bangkok Post Newspaper, July 2008).

It is a joke in Lao PDR that what Vietnam does today Lao PDR does tomorrow, but one which is also taken quite seriously. In friendly discussion of education reform an MoE official told me, '*Mother tongue teaching isn't in our plans yet, but it will be by the end of the year because Vietnam is piloting a new ethnic minority language curriculum'.*

Culture and ethnicities

For an ethnographic approach, the culture of the country provides the context of the work. Boase (1992) (for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) produced a paper called '*Working with your Lao Partner'* with the intention of helping external consultants to understand Lao culture. He refers to the seriousness of *'losing face or causing another to lose face'* (p.23) and the need to work with *'extreme diplomacy, ambiguity or even evasiveness'* (p.24). Human relations are very important in Lao and the adoption of appropriate behaviours is vital to effective interaction. However, culture is a very broad

concept wider than interpersonal relations and for the study is seen as an integrating force of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour. It is also the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices of an institution, organisation or group which define human behaviours. Rather than try to predict the effects of Lao culture on the study, I note its importance and will identify specific effects as I go along.

Evans (1999:1) opens his book *Laos: Culture and Society* with the statement, '*One of the paradoxes of studying Laos is that even those people most engaged in its affairs has questioned whether Laos exists as a 'real' national entity*. With Evans I do not doubt that the state of the Lao PDR exists as a political entity, but the statement refers to the extraordinary diversity of population, culture and life style in a small country. In a socialist country, many of its citizens are also practising Buddhists, with animists as the second largest religious group.

In terms of ethnicity, the somewhat vague categorisation of minority ethnic groups results in an unclear overview of the population. The USA CIA fact book[6] provides the following review of ethnicity on Lao PDR, relying on the 2005 census. The population is '*Lao 55%, Khmou 11%, Hmong 8%, other (over 100 minor ethnic groups) 26%*'. Thus some 45% of the population is not ethnically Lao, nor speaks the Lao language. Lao Education Law (2008) requires Lao to be the language of instruction in education institutions. Donor officials, both Lao and international, interpret this as an explicit means to promote national unity. Through the study I

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[6] Accessed at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html on 20/08/2010

became aware that many of those who characterise themselves as Lao and Lao speaking, because of regional dialectal differences, use a language considerably different from that used in Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR, and a number of teachers interviewed for the study, though considering themselves Lao speaking, reported difficulty in understanding some of the language of the primary curriculum.

Sungren (2008) in her introduction to *Exploring Teacher Education in Laos - aims, obstacles and possibilities* argues that the education system in Lao PDR has to deal with widely varying contexts. She identifies them as covering pre-modern, modern and late modern societies, indicating a range of education contexts, in some of which education is still entirely the responsibility of the family and community and with others, in urban centres, rapidly joining the knowledge society, with access to media and information technology. As Sungren notes, MoE is attempting to create a model of practice that can fit all these situations. To illustrate the remoteness of some communities I repeat a story told to me, in friendly conversation, by the Lao official of a bilateral donor of a visit with a group of evaluators to a rural area.

> As we were walking to a remote village we met two children about six or eight years old sitting by the side of the path while their parents worked in the field. A member of our party who had some knowledge of local languages tried to engage them, 'Why aren't you at school?' Possibly because the children were shy and frightened by the presence of such different strangers we got no answer. After sharing some food with them the children became more communicative, giving

their names. We asked them, 'What language do you speak?' They answered 'The People's language'. To 'What is your ethnicity?' they answered,' We are the People', and to 'What will you do when you grow up? We will be adult People.

A socialist state

In this subsection I give a brief overview of the political situation in Lao PDR, with particular reference to the processes of government decision-making. The information is based on CIA Fact Book[7] and a Wikipedia entry[8] as well as discussion with Lao citizens.

Lao PDR is a single-party socialist republic. In 1975, the Communist Pathet Lao took control of the government ending a six-century-old monarchy and instituting a strict socialist regime closely aligned to Vietnam. The only legal political party is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Government policies are determined by the party through the all-powerful nine-member Politburo and the 49-member Central Committee. Important government decisions are vetted by the Council of Ministers. The head of state is President Choummaly Sayasone, who is also the General Secretary of the LPRP. The head of government is Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong.

A new constitution was adopted in 1991 and enshrined a leading role for the LPRP. The National Assembly is an elected body but in a one party state, choice

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[7] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html accessed on 19/02/2011
[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laos#Government_and_politics accessed on 19/02/2011

for voters is for or against the government proposed candidate. The most recent elections took place in April 2006, with the next predicted to take place in 2011. The ninety-nine seat National Assembly acts as a rubber stamp for the LPRP, and approves new laws, although the executive branch retains authority to issue some binding decrees.

A gradual, very limited move to private enterprise and the liberalisation of foreign investment laws began in 1988. Lao PDR became a member of ASEAN in 1997.

The relative closeness of the revolution in time means the ideals of the revolution are alive for numbers of people. All high level officials are party members and party membership brings social benefit, for example, overwhelmingly schools for the gifted are populated with the children of party members. Some higher level civil servants are in position because of their contribution to the revolution. The current political situation centralises decision making, with the greater part of the population excluded from decision making processes.

The situation of education in Lao PDR

The Government of Lao PDR (GoL) was an early signatory to the World Declaration Education for All arising from the Jomtien Conference (1990) and has prioritised the expansion of access to education. Net enrolment ratios (NER) for primary education have increased from 63% in 1990 to approximately 92% in 2008/9. Gross enrolment ratios (GERs) for lower secondary increased from 30%

in 1990 to about 63% in 2008/9. For upper secondary, the net enrolment rate (NER) has risen rapidly from 26.3% in 2003 to 37% in the school year 2008/09. Further increased enrolment in secondary school is predicted. Gender differentials at primary level have dropped by about 7.5% since 1996 (from 21.6% to 14.2%) and at lower secondary level, girls' enrolment has increased by over 5% from 2003 to almost 58% in the school year 2008/09 compared with a 2% increase for boys to 67% in the same school year. During the same period, at the secondary level, girls' enrolment increased by about 4.4% compared with 5.1% for boys and significant gender differentials remain. At the primary level, girls' enrolment lags behind significantly and at entry level for lower secondary (grade 6) it is over 10% less than that of boys. Despite the rapid enrolment growth, national enrolment statistics hide the significant disparities of gender, ethnicity, economic status, and geographic location and numerous challenges still face the education sector. To illustrate the outstanding need, the proposal to the World Bank for access to Fast Track Initiative Catalytic Fund (FTI-CF) (2010) records that '*approximately half of the 8,500 primary schools in the country are 'incomplete' meaning that they do not offer education to Grade 5; that many schools do not have toilets or clean drinking water and in-service teacher training is still haphazard'*. The gap in learning achievement between urban and rural areas is great as is the gap in access and achievement between ethnic Lao and minority ethnic children. There is a huge challenge in improving access to the last 10%, the hardest to reach children, and keeping children in school to complete grade 5, the end of the primary cycle. A high proportion of children completing primary education have not achieved

functional literacy[9]. This, together with high repetition and dropout rates make the system internally very inefficient.

In the context of diversity and poverty described above, the achievement of the national aspiration towards education presents an enormous challenge and foreign aid has become a vital element in maintaining education services, as well as supporting their development. UNESCO figures from 2002 estimate donor loans and grant aid as furnishing nearly 70 percent of public expenditure, while in 2005, UNDP estimated foreign contribution at 80 percent.

The reform agenda

Education reform is an aspect of national aspiration in Lao PDR. I quote from the National Education objectives, taken from the Lao People's Democratic Republic Education for All National Plan of Action 2003-2015:

> The Education Objectives: To build a young generation with global scientific knowledge, patriotic values, a spirit of solidarity with ethnic groups in the country and with friendly countries in the world; to know their rights and interests and obligation as citizens, how to preserve and expand the traditions and culture of the nation, and how to be self-dependent and self-strengthening; to be economical and know how to harmoniously combine personal interests with that of the collective; to equip themselves with general knowledge and knowledge in specialized fields, specifically in science and technical fields; to be moral, disciplined, responsible, and dutiful; to be healthy, innovative, and of a civilized mind; and to be prepared for the defense, construction and development work of the nation.

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[9] This general statement is found in a number of donor documents, though I could not find supporting evidence.

A series of qualities to be inculcated by education into young people is sketched, cast very much as moral values. These include patriotism and preparedness to defend, build and develop the nation. The statement aims to balance the personal and the 'collective', with the duties to society strongly stressed. The passage demonstrates a view of education as a tool for nation building and is more open and explicit than most countries in the attempt to use education as a means to impose a particular ideology.

Education is an important pillar of the Government's poverty reduction strategy. The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) (2004) describes education reform as a major strategy for poverty reduction and on p.30 says:

> In education, the priorities are increased access to education for all people, especially for the under-privileged, strengthening of non-formal education, vocational training, improvement of teachers' qualifications and the relevance of school curricula, and improved management of the education sector.

In this way education reform is seen fundamental to deep-seated and long-term change in Lao PDR. Attempts at rapid change have been a feature of education in Lao PDR. For example, moves have been made towards decentralized management, with some authorities devolved to Provincial Education Services (PES), District Education Bureaus (DEB) and schools. The reality is that decentralisation has not impacted widely and the system is centrally controlled with little decision making relegated to provincial and district authorities. Private schools are allowed, but with strong control, including the use of government

trained teachers and government curricula.

Donors to education reform in Lao PDR and the harmonisation agenda

The raw data of a donor mapping exercise was provided by MoE which shows the agreed donor support from 2010 to 2015. It was not a final document and so not quoted directly. However it shows the relatively small number of donors to education. They are two development banks, a UN Organisation and four bilateral donors and two major international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) as well as considerable contributions from China and Korea. Other numerous interventions from small NGOs are not recorded. During the time of the study another bilateral donor was active, but withdrew support in 2010. Although I could not access a similar mapping exercise for the study years, I suggest that there is a growing percentage of aid to education from China and Korea, who do not work within the GoL/donor dialogue framework set up after the Vientiane agreement. The significant feature of the mapping exercise is that it reveals a total budget of 550.20 million USD worth of donor aid needed to implement the Education Sector Development Framework (ESDF) agreed between donors and GoL in 2009, but a commitment of only 305.89 million USD leaving deficit in commitment of some 244.31 million USD.

The attitude of both donors and recipients to the processes and purposes of education development aid forms a defining context to the discourse of educational reform in Lao PDR. In recent years in the face of low effectiveness of

donor aid and consequent criticism, a more coordinated approach to donor aid is being implemented worldwide. Since the Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development of 2002, donor agencies have been working to intensify their efforts to harmonise operational procedures, reduce transactional costs, and to make disbursement and delivery more flexible and more centred on the needs and objectives of the recipient country. The harmonisation agenda forms a central part of the government/donor discourse in Lao PDR. A concrete example of this is the signing and adoption of the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, signed by the Government of Lao in June 2007. It is a local agreement based on the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) setting out an agenda to '*make aid more effective and assist the country in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 and the long-term development goal of exiting the status of least developed country by 2020 (the 2020 goal')*[10]. The Vientiane Declaration was endorsed by government and the majority of development partners[11]. Consequently a three tiered process of aid management and co-ordination was set up, namely a High Level Forum, a Task Force and a Secretariat. The Vientiane Agreement, during the study, was described a number of times by donor officials as a major achievement.

After the Vientiane Declaration, eight sectoral working groups (SWG) were set up and have become the main mechanism for coordination and dialogue between donor and government in technical areas. One of these is the Education and Gender Working Group (EGWG), later called the Education Sector Working

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[10] The Vientiane Declaration: paragraph 1.
[11] China and Vietnam are not signatories

Group (ESWG)[12]. The ESWG provides a forum for policy coordination between actors in education who are Government and major aid agencies and can be considered a body which is concerned with policy interpretation and development, for education in Lao PDR.

The Education Sector Development Framework (ESDF), produced with support external technical assistance (TA), was endorsed by the Politburo in 2009. The framework provides direction and an action plan for education reform from 2009 to 2015. The plan provides a comprehensive review of the sector with plans for the development of all aspects of the sector. These cover:

- basic education which comprises early childhood education, primary and lower secondary education, inclusion and non formal education;

- post basic education which includes upper secondary education; technical and vocational education (TVET), youth skill building, higher education and teacher education.

It also contains plans to strengthen sector governance and performance management by:

- strengthening education management and human resources, with particular emphasis on reducing cost barriers for the poor.

Priorities include:

- equitable access to education services through reducing cost barriers for education and so reducing repetition and dropout

- enabling greater private and community participation

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[12] The term gender was dropped from the title, presumably to indicate gender is an area of concern in all aspects of development.

- improvement of education facilities

- curriculum reform

- instructional materials

- pre and in-service teacher training and staff development

- strengthening central and provincial planning and monitoring systems.

Donor aid in the period of the study is through projects and the model seems to be likely to go on into the future as interventions currently (2010-2011) in planning are in project mode. The ESDF is seen as an early step towards a more coordinated approach by donors, by ensuring overlaps are ironed out, a mode of donor support still far away from a sector wide approach (SWAP) or pooled funding. At the time of writing, three donors were planning to experiment with pooled funding for the implementation of the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), channelling money through government systems. It remains to be seen whether this forms the basis for a change of approach by other donors.

1.2.2 Corruption as a context of education reform in Lao PDR

Corruption is difficult to discuss openly in Lao PDR and other countries because it is essentially hidden, in particular from the outsider. However, I include as a context because corruption or more precisely the fear of corruption is a major force shaping donors' behaviour in education reform in Lao PDR. It promotes donor agencies to take defensive action, which includes insistence on the use of donors' own budget and procurement systems, and is causing slow progress

towards greater ownership by Government. It also slows implementation activity because disbursement of money is constantly held up. The fear of corruption also impacts on relations, and corruption proofing causes resentment, an example of which I record in Chapter Six, in which I record a sense of distrust generated between donor and recipient.

There is no doubt that corruption is rife in Lao PDR. In 2008 the country was ranked at position 151[13], in 2009 position 144 and in 2010 at position 154 in the international corruption index which uses a scale of 1 to 178, with position one the least corrupt. In a recognisably corrupt country, corruption cannot be ignored and in the planning document reviewed in Chapter Five corruption is addressed at paragraph 71 in the following way: '(The Bank's) *Anticorruption Policy (1998) was explained to and discussed with the Government and the Executing Agency*' with explanation of the Bank's powers of investigation and audit. In this way the donor agency sets itself the role of policing possible areas of corruption.

Moyo (2010 Kindle location 941) identifies corruption as major cause of the failure of aid in Africa and goes further to identify aid as a cause of corruption, saying with, '*aid's help, corruption fosters corruption, nations quickly descend into a vicious cycle of aid. Foreign aid props up corrupt governments – providing them with freely usable cash.*'

Moyo's arguments are persuasive and provide a thinking context to the study. My

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[13] Figures from Transparency International

attention is placed on the impact of the discourse of corruption. To start the

discussion I include this lengthy quotation used by the World Bank on its website

to indicate the view of one development agency. McCarthy (2002) from his work in

Indonesia argues the following:

> The distorting effects of corruption on projects take effect as early as the project
>
> design phase where project requirements are overstated or tailored to fit one
>
> specific company, they reach into the bidding process where collusion amongst
>
> firms or between public officials and bidders renders competition ineffective,
>
> leading to assigning of contracts to underperforming firms at inflated prices.
>
> Furthermore, bribes are needed to release funds. Kick-backs further persuade
>
> government officials to turn a blind eye to sluggishly implemented projects, staying
>
> behind contract requirements, leaving roads unfinished and aid not delivered.
>
> Bribes also help to smoothen financial and technical audits and to falsify bills and
>
> payrolls. Corruption at the village level includes disappearing aid deliveries or
>
> mistargeting, where not the poorest but the best connected and those willing to
>
> pay receive aid. Indonesia provides an interesting case for how corruption in aid
>
> projects works and why it persists.

McCarthy locates corruption in the whole system of procurement - consulting

companies, local officials, central and local governments and communities - but

notably the donor agency itself is not targeted as an agent of corruption.

The fear of corruption in Lao PDR promotes the continuation of the project mode

and slow movement to budget support, based in the view that the government

systems are not robust enough to handle large monies. Corruption is perceived to

be located in the handling of money and solutions are found in good policing by the donor and, in the longer term, attention to issues of transparency and good governance. A them and us situation is sketched: they (the Government) are corrupt; we (the donors) are not corrupt.

However if I address corruption as a discourse, I see it located in a diverse set of contexts and power structures, with histories and future projection and, therefore, with the possibility of change. In Lao PDR, I have been aware of 'corrupt' practices springing from a strong cultural bias to give preferential treatment to relatives and friends; from the need to maintain public face and from traditional expectations of an employer receiving a bursary for providing employment. It is deeply engrained in the functioning of society and has its own rules and standards. No direct examples were revealed from my research data in Lao PDR but an incident in Bangladesh, a country even lower in the Transparency International index, where I was working on a large EC funded project, alerted me to the fact that corruption is a social system with its own rules. The local building engineer with whom I was working confided to me that an engineer who took 5% of the budget or less was considered '*honest*', but to take more than that was considered greedy, reprehensible and socially unacceptable.

Yet a form of corruption, or at least massaging of evidence, encompasses the practices of both Lao organisations and donor agencies. Riddell (2008:186) points out that donor reports are likely to overestimate the success of their interventions. During the time of the study I came across a number of examples of donors'

unreality about the impact of interventions. The most blatant example was provided by a project I have followed for three years. It was declared by the donor to be its second most successful project in Lao PDR, with consequent awarding of plaques and banners. The project had presented extraordinary difficulties in implementation; money had been very difficult to disburse; activities delayed because poor implementation of procurement and financial systems and the project was extended by two years to complete the programme. Its impact was difficult to evaluate because objectives were phrased only in quantitative terms, e.g. training courses implemented, or schools to be built, and it lacked realistic impact indicators. Two years before its end it was publically declared to be '*Project at Risk*', a category representing the last warning before that donor withdraws financial support. I can only surmise that the sudden '*success*' of the project was judged by the disbursement of the whole project budget, a circumstance largely due to a massive down turn in the value of the US dollar, the currency of budgeting. The project budget was therefore considerably reduced. I record this, and lesser forms of manipulation of indicators, as a form of corruption because not only does it result in the disbursement of large sums of money without a reasonable level of evidence of success, but it is motivated by desire for the good public image of the donor, rather than to bring benefit to the recipient.

Corruption as a discourse can thus be seen as encompassing both donors and recipients and actions are located in the relationship between them. Explanations of slow disbursement of funds vary according to where one stands in relation to the intervention. Donor agencies explain the slow progress by incapacity on the

part of the implementers to manage the financial systems effectively. The Ministry interprets failures to disseminate money by a donor agency as behaving irrationally. The latter is illustrated by the comment of a Ministry official charged with implementing a large scale project, who, in interview in English, told me:

> Sometimes it looks like the donors don't want to distribute money. They keep making objections and sending the documents back. Perhaps they don't have the money, but they should tell us. We just need to know so that we can plan. I have had to cancel two rounds of workshops because the donors don't release the money. People in the provinces lose trust in us.

Fairclough (2001a:1) writes that '*consciousness is the first step to liberation'*. While addressing corruption as a discourse does not in itself offer a means to address an intractable problem, a new consciousness may offer impetus to seek out new and different approaches.

1.2.3   International contexts

In this subsection I look at two international contexts which impact on donor aided education reform in Lao PDR, the impact of global views of education reform and international constructions of donor aid.

Global views of education reform

Lao PDR is a part of a globalising world and globalisation is impacting on education in Lao PDR. There are conflicting views of the extent and importance of

globalisation. Fukuyama (1992) has posited his well known '*end of history'* thesis, arguing that all societies will become similar with a one world system, thus ending history as the story of competing nations, while Claassen (1999:30) argues the nation state has always co-existed with international markets and that globalisation does not automatically equate with the lessening of state functions. Globalisation impacts on education in Lao PDR through the adoption of an international pattern of reform, which includes moves towards decentralisation of education authorities, encouragement of private schools, sector planning, and the perception of education as a tool for developing the economy. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999:81) characterise globalisation as a major force in the *'detraditionalisation'* of society and state that *'traditions no longer shape society in self-evident and unquestionable ways'*. Lao society is, outside the main cities, still traditional, largely agrarian and governed within authoritarian structures set up after the revolution of 1975 and for many Lao citizens education reform is likely to be the first and main encounter with global ideas. The impact of globalised ways of thinking and the ways Lao citizens respond and adapt to new ideas and procedures is of interest to the study.

International constructions of donor aid

A significant context for the study is the sort of thing that donor aid is. Rogerson (2005: 538) comments that in a vast body of literature about donor aid the most often asked question is, '*How can we make aid more effective?*' The question seldom asked is, *'Why give aid at all?*' I start with the way Kingsbury, Remenyi,

McKay and Hunt (2004:47) answer to that question and quote their response in some depth:

> The purpose of aid, or why countries give aid, rests on a range of interrelated values about what might be called an international social contract. That is, there is a broad understanding amongst developed countries that, in order for the world to be, or to be seen to be, a moderately equitable place, or at least to alleviate some of the worst suffering, there needs to be some form of international assistance. For some developed countries this follows a perceived sense of responsibility following the process of decolonization. For others, it is intended to assist less developed states, to reduce the probability of their further decline and potential for instability. Many donors provide aid not only for humanitarian reasons, but to enhance their own economic and political interest, through encouraging their own experts, or shaping the economic policies or political persuasion or recipient countries.

The above paragraph depicts donor aid as a social construction (an international social contract) that may be rooted in altruism, ideology or the gaining of practical advantage. It chimes with my experience that donors may act with more than one motive at any one time. To illustrate this I refer to a mission that was ostensibly to formulate a plan of support for the declining education system of a fragile state. At a confidential meeting the donor's functionaries expressed another motivation, which was *'to be there when the power vacuum caused by the fall of the present government happens'*[14]. It may be predicted that the complexity of motives of donors may be matched by equally complex motivation of aid recipients and

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[14] From the briefing sessions for a Programme Formulation Mission Nov 2008

covert motivations are, by definition, not open to scrutiny.

Another definition of donor development aid is given by Cohen and Manion (1994:15) who see it as situated in the interaction between international theoretical discourses, donor policies and practices, national agendas and strategies as well as local ideologies and practices. Their definition identifies a broadly based venture comprising economic, political and cultural elements.

The above definitions allow me to see donor aid as an institution that has a structure which has been created socially and fulfils social, political and economic purposes. As a social structure, it comprises language, categorisations, concepts, ideas and actions that have become recognisable as donor aid. Recognisable actions (formulation missions, evaluations missions, tender procedures) and language (technical assistance, inception reports) alert us to the fact that donor aid is going on. Thus it is possible to see donor aid to education as an institutionalised way of thinking, with linguistic and social boundaries defining what is said and done and because it is backed by the political will of powerful donor organisations including governments, UN organisations, development banks and national governments has considerable power in the world.

1.3 The researcher's relationship to the study: a personal history

In this section I further contextualise the study by considering the ways the differing roles I play and have played in a career in education will impact on the

study design and implementation. I have been a teacher, consultant in education development and now I take on the role of researcher.

I have been aware for some time that there is a tension between the roles of consultant and that of teacher. In fact, one source of motivation for the study lies in my ongoing attempt to reconcile the roles. I have attempted to make my various areas of work cohere within a conceptual framework and to explore the differing roles and how they come together for the study. Here I give a brief view of my career as educator indicating the significant experiences which have developed the conceptual underpinning to my work.

I started my career as a primary school teacher and became interested in development work as a by-product of my work as a class teacher in Brick Lane in east London, at a time when many children were recently arrived from Sylhet, in Bangladesh. At times all the children in my class were recently arrived, bewildered by the change in their lives. The children came to school with their own, their family's and community's expectation of what a school is, with no language in common with the teacher and with identities and loyalties that looked rather to Sylhet than London, a situation which demanded exploration of the role of 'teacher' in circumstances which deviate from the UK norm. The school valued experimentation and research and encouraged thinking space. Some of this thinking is captured in articles[15] I wrote at the time. A trip to Bangladesh, financed by ILEA's Sir William Houghton Scheme further challenged my views of school

and schooling, allowing me to see the differing place schooling plays in societies and communities' expectation when they send their children to school. These very rich experiences allowed the creation and honing of a world view with values and understandings that have been a reference point for my work ever since. Subsequently I worked in a London University which set itself to offer opportunity to those who had previously not met success in the education system. Thus I was challenged to teach those with little confidence in the education system and a poor self-image in relation to education.

It would seem that this background would give a good foundation for work in international development, but I found the skills difficult to transfer to capacity development activities. The clue to the difficulty may lie in something characterised by both Caddell (2005) and Mosse (2004). Both writers identify an approach to development located in unwarranted certainty. Caddell (p.456), from her work in Nepal, identifies donors' actions based in '*a perceived shared vision of educational reform'* which is in contrast to the donor community's articulation of the need for wider participation and listening to a variety of voices. Mosse (2004 pp 640 onwards) describes influential development agencies searching for '*a universal view of good policy'* which he contrasts with the motivations of field implementers.

I felt a tension between my analyses of the situation, my preferred approach and the certainties which bind the consultant contractually. In my first tour abroad, in

Lao PDR, I was concerned to explore the role of an external consultant[16].

Subsequently when contracted to bilateral agencies I found the constraints of the

contract, with the reduction of the work to certain pre-identified outputs too

restricting. This has led me to refuse capacity development contracts. I have

focussed since on project monitoring and evaluation, an area of work which allows

more room for the exercise of judgement.

Tensions between my role as teacher, consultant and that of researcher are

played out in this study, in particular, the focus on capacity development and the

role of the technical advisor. I have been disappointed that the approach of

bilateral donor and development banks does not appear to bring about more

improvement to the education of numbers of children, and I start the study with

the belief that there is a better way to do it. I recognise that this may put me into a

category of *"I mean well'*, a reference to Moyo's (2010 Kindle location 597)

heading '*We mean well'*, which prefaces a damning condemnation of the

approach of the aid donors. However, my background experience pushes me to

explore where mismatches occur and ultimately if it is possible to have 'good'

donor-supported development aid.

I relish taking on the role of objective, critical researcher, yet I must be aware that

the role of technical advisor might still influence or permeate my approach. I have

had to be particularly conscious in schools to ensure that I observed rather than

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[16] Emblen V. (1995) Who is he Expert , Development in Practice Vol 5,No.3 (Aug 1995) pp.232-236 Taylor and Francis

judged. Also much of the field study in Lao PDR was be planned to follow on paid contracts. The two jobs must be separated and I have been conscious of the need to 'code-switch' between the two.

1.4   The researcher's relationship to the contexts of study: insider or outsider

In this subsection, I locate myself in relation to the contexts to be studied, as it affects the study's implementation and I address the advantages and disadvantages to being on the inside or outside of the contexts of research.

I lived in Lao PDR in the period 1990-1993 giving technical assistance to MoE and have had continuing contact since, both with friends and on short term aid contracts. As such I am something of an insider in Lao PDR. I am familiar with some aspects of the culture and I have a working knowledge of the official language, not enough to undertake interviews, but enough to check the quality of translation and interpretation. I can also consider myself an insider because I am a member of the development profession, that is, I have worked in development education, for governments and donor agencies in a number of countries. I am conversant with procedures and practices of development interventions and am competent in the register of development discourse. Phrases such as '*objectively verifiable indicators*' and '*log frames'* were completely unknown to me before I joined the profession and I have learned to understand words such as '*efficiency'* in the specific way of programme documents. Because of my familiarity with

development interventions and its register, I can claim to be an insider in the profession of development practitioners and competent in the consultants' discourse of development education.

However there are contexts of the study of which I am not an insider. Schooling takes place within national education systems, which are located in the country's own political economic and cultural dynamic (Robertson 2000:73). Lao PDR has a socialist political system and a traditionally authoritarian culture, with contexts to which I can never gain access. Vulliamy (1990:65), as an expatriate researching in a developing country, saw himself as a conspicuous outsider. As a foreigner I am conspicuously an outsider and undoubtedly I will be perceived as such by many of the respondents in data collection activity. I am aware that the presence of a foreigner can raise expectations of a new project or other support to education.

Much of the literature of the insider/outsider discussion comes from people researching their own classrooms or institutions (see Hammersley 1993, and Wragg 1999) in which the insider/outsider roles are much clearer than in this study. However Vulliamy, Lewin and Stevens (1990:211) conclude that '*there is a sense that all researchers are outsiders'.* My role in this study is both insider and outsider, the degree of insideness varying from context to context. Mercer (2007), on the basis of her research in higher education, rejects the notion of the insider/outsider as a dichotomy, rather describing it as a continuum. She argues that individuals are not easily categorised. Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee,

Ntseane, and Muhammad (2001) bring together a series of understandings about the ways researchers can be constructed as outsiders in their own communities and record attitudes to interviewers constructed because of age, education, skin colour or class.

In the context of this study, Lao/foreignness is one of a number of categories which may impact on the study. Others include male/female, educator/non educator, and, of particular importance in the country, sympathetic/non-sympathetic. However, the notion of the conspicuous foreigner cannot be overlooked, and, I presume, will impact on the ways interviewees present themselves and to respond to me.

Since there are multiple contexts it is not possible to stand in the same relationship to them all. Hammersley (1993:219) argues that:

> there are no overwhelming advantages to being an insider or an outsider. Each position has its advantages and disadvantages though these will take on slightly different weights depending on the particular circumstances and purposes of the research.

Mercer (2007:6) sums up the arguments and helps me identify my position when she says:

> familiarity will allow a better understanding of the social situation, better understanding of the subtle and diffuse links between situation and events, while on the other hand familiarity can make insiders take things for granted.

1.5   Description of the study and its structure

Donor aided education reform is a very big structure composed of many discourses, both national and international. Literature review reveals many studies which explore specific issues of donor aided reform - evaluation, corruption, teacher education and financial disbursement - with recommendations for changed practice in that area. While recognising the value of these studies, I perceived a need to explore the reform as an overall structure and wanted to test the thesis that the relative failure of interventions lies not only in specific attitudes or activities but in complex of interactions at all levels of the education system. In particular I wanted to examine the ways the discourses at different levels 'rub together' to produce effective practices or constraints. To achieve the above after the three introductory chapters, in Chapters Four to Seven I examine selected discourses of education reform in Lao PDR. Chapter Four is concerned with meetings of the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) and public dialogue over education reform. In Chapter Five I examine a programme planning document as a link in the chain between policy and practice and in Chapter Six I turn the investigatory lens onto the related notions of capacity and capacity development. In the final data review chapter, Chapter Seven, I turn the lens onto implementation and the impact of the reform. In Chapter Eight I stand back and reflect on issues raised by the study's implementation, including those arising from undertaking a study in a country other than my own and on the crosscutting arising from the study's implementation. In Chapter Nine I pull together the findings and implications of the study.

1.6   Conclusion to the chapter

In this chapter I have looked at the national and international contexts in which the study is embedded, and identified the researcher's position within them. I place considerable emphasis on the contexts of study, both as defining factors and as a means to interpret actions and behaviours. Although it is not possible to identify exact relationships between action and context, I expect differing contexts will impact on actors who stand in varying relations to the interventions of donor aided education reform in differing ways. Global issues, the national political context and the policies of donor agencies seem likely to have a defining function at central level and in the discourse of GoL and donors over education reform. Whether these cohere or contradict each other and the extent to which they are understood by implementers at field level are areas of interest. Equally it seems likely that at field level traditional cultural approaches, hierarchies and constructions of childhood will impact strongly on attempts to change teaching/learning methodologies, and whether they are seen as supporting or inhibiting factors is a further area of exploration.

I continue to place emphasis on context in the next chapter and reflect on the contexts which influence the selection of research questions, and methods of data collection. I record the study's objective and detailed research questions and investigate how the epistemological and ontological stance of the researcher influences the research design.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTS OF THE INVESTIGATION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STUDY METHODOLOGY

2.0   Overview of the chapter

In the previous chapter I emphasised the importance of context to the study, a position reinforced by Murray and Overton (2003:20) who advise the researcher to look not only at the study content but to ensure attention to a wide review of issues affecting study design. In this chapter I discuss contexts that have impacted on the selection of research questions; the programme design and data collection methodology. I start the chapter by giving the study's broad objective and the research questions with explanations for their selection, and go on to discuss what I consider to be a defining contextual feature that is, the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher and their influence on the research choices made. In relation to this I discuss the process of the planning of the study, the choices made and the constraints, in particular the practical and ethical contexts, on the study's implementation.

2.1. The study's broad objective and research questions

An assumption underpinning the study is that there is a gap between the expected outcomes of development aid and the impact on the ultimate beneficiaries. Something similar, a gap between the rhetoric of aid and the realities on the ground, is noted by commentators such as King and McGrath (2002: 37) and Mosse (2004:669). The work of the study is to consider the validity of the assumption, and to identify the mechanisms and power structures at work. By this means I seek to gain new insights into an area that I feel is currently poorly described, a stance supported by Mosse (2004:641). The study elicits and contrasts the views and experiences of actors standing in differing relations to the donor aided education reform, in the attempt to gain deeper understanding of the processes and impact of related interventions. A particular focus of the study is the ways donor aid to the Government of Lao PDR are translated into practice and ultimately how aid impacts on improved schooling as judged by classroom teaching.

The broad objective of the study is:

> to explore international development aid to education reform in Lao PDR, with specific focus on how reform initiatives are understood, experienced and put into practice by teachers in rural schools.

The research questions and the rationales for their selection are given below.

Research Question One

The first question refers to the institution of more public discussion of policy and practice between MoE and donor officials in response to the new direction of donor aid after the Paris Declaration.

> What does examination of the public discourse of education reform between donor agencies and GoL reveal of the positioning of agencies and individuals within that public policy discourse, of power structures and possibilities for practical impact?

Research Question Two

The second question is concerned with the written discourses that form communication between donor agencies and MoE. These texts both build on and construct the discourse of education reform. The written discourses of programme planning documents provide a link between policy and practice.

> What do programme planning documents reveal about the positioning of written documents in eventual application and the relationship of the new policies to changed education practices?

Research Question Three

The relationship between capacity development, knowledge transfer and change on the ground is explored in Question Three.

> What is the relation between the transfer of the new knowledge/skills/information

and change to schooling and how is the new knowledge/skills/information

perceived by actors in education reform and their practice adjusted in the light of

it?

Research Question Four

Question Four explores education reform as an emancipatory activity and asks

whether donor aided education reform and the reformed structures and practices

allow increased agency to actors.

> Do the revised practices of donor aided education reform as experienced by the
>
> actors implementing it lead to their emancipation and greater agency?

Each of the above questions is designed to elicit the views, expectations and

constructions of people who stand in different relations to change in the education

system. Each question provides a lens through which the differing discourses of

donor aided education reform are inspected.

Research Question Five

Question Five reflects on the tools available for such a study and examines

theoretical stances and methodologies adopted for the study. These are largely

developed in western society and I reflect on their value and the validity for

research in a centrally controlled, information poor and largely agrarian society.

> How do the theoretical stances and methodologies of the study, in particular

discourse and critical theory, support the analysis of reform in a non-western, developing country?

2.2   The researcher's epistemological and ontological stances

Recognising that my view of social reality has influenced the choice of the research questions, I review my perspective as researcher which influences the selection of data collection methodology and its interpretation (Scott 2000a:4). Harding (1987:3) makes a similar point when she says the methods we employ are profoundly shaped by our epistemological stance, as well as the ways we define our roles as researchers; what we consider ethical practices and how we interpret our data.

To establish my own stance I used two tools, one offered by Cohen and Manion (1994:10 and 11) who invite the reader to identify either an objectivist or subjectivist stance to social reality, that is, their ontological stance. The other comes from Murray and Overton (2003:21) who offer a means of identifying an epistemological stance, using Habermas's three broad types of science, each indicating a different research perspective and possible selection of research strategy. I select two examples which I see as applying directly to this study from a longer list given by Cohen and Manion (1994:10) and have laid them out in table form to make comparison easier.

Table One   Epistemological stance of the researcher

View of social reality	
Objectivist: Realism: The world exists and is knowable as it really is. Organisations are real entities with a life of their own.	**Subjectivist:** Find out what values are embodied in organisational action and whose they are. Change the people or change their values if you can.
Objectivist: Change the structure of the organisation to meet social values and needs	**Subjectivist:** Idealism: the world exists but different people construe it in very different ways. Organisations are invented social reality.

Cohen and Manion lead me to see myself as a subjectivist, with a desire to change inequitable situations. This also confirms my view that educational reform is a social product and may be construed in different ways. In particular, organisations (of which development aid is one) being invented social reality, are open to change.

In the following table, I have included some elements of Murray and Overton's description of Habermas's three types of science, with their links to common methods of data collection.

Table Two   Epistemological stance of the researcher

Type of science	Common methods
Empirical-analytical	**Essential elements:** Facts speak for themselves; science should seek facts about observable objects; normative and moral questions are avoided as they cannot be measured scientifically; proposes that processes and patterns can be predicted. **Most common methods:** Surveys, closed questions, some cartographic analysis, secondary data, can be important, although primary data central also.

Historical-hermeneutic	**Essential element:** Rejects the empirical view of the world; facts do not exist independently of experience; interpretation of process and pattern rather than prediction. **Most common methods:** interviews; open questions, visual texts, participatory methods including participant observation and ethnography; primary data generally more important.
Critical	**Essential elements**: The uncovering of non-explicit processes and relations; the communication of these findings to promote progressive social change; the explicit incorporation of moral questions. **Main approaches:** A broad range of methods are utilised depending on the nature of the critical science being utilised. Mixed methods are often appropriate for such studies.

I place the study largely in the historical-hermeneutic camp, because I see facts firmly located in context and as interpreted through experience. However the attention to social change and the incorporation of ethical and moral questions suggests critical theory. Murray and Overton see each of Habermas's three categories as a continuum, that is, each covering a broad range of perspectives and therefore it is appropriate to identify my stance as a historical-hermeneutic approach with aspects of the critical theory.

The identification of myself as a subjectivist and the positioning of the study in a historical-hermeneutic and critical framework, suggests that methodology should be somewhere in the field of ethnomethodology, which in a very general sense means the study of the ways in which people make sense of their social world

(Garfinkel 1967). Ethnomethodology itself covers a variety of positions, methodologies and methods of data inspection. Ethnography is a sub set of the wider field of ethnomethodology (Scott 2000a:740) and is identified by its attention to the culture of people and organisations (Anderson 2002:121). My concern for education reform as a vehicle for emancipation suggests critical theory, which together with an ethnographic approach, implies critical ethnography.

2.2.1 Ethnographic methodology

My experience in Lao PDR as described in the Chapter One suggests that I am at least to some extent an insider in some the fields of this study, sufficient to allow an ethnographic approach. I turned to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3) for a view of ethnography and quote the answer to the question posed in a chapter title,' *What is Ethnography?*' In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives, for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of the inquiry. Generally speaking ethnographers draw on a range of sources of data.

The views of the authors quoted above confirm the validity of the approach to this research which has, by necessity in the politically sensitive area of education reform in a socialist country, adopted an opportunist and serendipitous approach

to data collection and has adopted a model of inquiry which responds to issues, questions and areas of interest that emerge from the process of the study.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3) comment on methods employed by ethnographic research:

> As a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life, to make sense of our surroundings, of other people's actions, and perhaps what we do ourselves...ethnography is then a significant development of the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world... that is attuned to the purposes of producing research knowledge.

The question posed for the researcher then is how research knowledge is produced from the ordinary process of making sense of the social world. For me the process relies on the selection and use of appropriate theoretical perspectives, thinking tools and means of analysis. These are largely addressed in the next chapter, and, in this chapter, I look at the practical questions needed to turn an intention into a doable activity.

Ethnography, critical theory and critical ethnography

As stated, the first three chapters of this thesis are designed to emphasise the importance of context to the study. An ethnographic approach implies research in which hypotheses are generated from the study of action in context. The approach allows diverse research approaches and flexibility in methods of data

collection and analysis. A critical approach is also firmly situated in its social

context and emphasises the ways knowledge is shaped by the power in those

contexts. Both ethnographic and critical approaches highlight the values of both

researcher and researched as defining contexts.

Importantly critical theory is based in a tradition which seeks to democratise

relationships and institutions (Held, 1980:14). My adoption of it is therefore not

value free, but indicates my own value position which identifies some actors in

education reform in Lao PDR as in need of emancipation. At a practical level a

critical approach questions the separation of theory and method, seeing them as

interconnected and working together to create knowledge.

Where critical theory and ethnography come together a complex theoretical

orientation toward cultural contexts is defined. Contexts are recognised as

constantly changing through a process of conflict and negotiation. Critical

ethnography explicitly assumes that cultures and contexts are positioned

unequally in power relations and that a study must acknowledge pre-existing

ideologies and positions of the researcher and researches. I also note that cultural

representations can be partial and partisan and will varying from person to

person.

2.2.2 The relationship of epistemology to methodology and method

The design of the first three chapters was to provide clarity by addressing

separately the practical, ontological and epistemological and theoretical contexts. However in the course my reflections I identified ethnography as a research methodology, but when it takes on a critical perspective it takes on aspects of a theoretical discourse; discourse becomes both a theoretical construct and a methodology. To explore this problem, I start with Harding's (1987:2-3) distinction between epistemology, methodology and method:

> Epistemology ("a theory of knowledge"), methodology ("a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed") and method ("a technique for gathering evidence").

The above insight goes some way to explicate the relationship between the epistemological constructs underlying the study, its methodology and methods of data collection and analysis. By seeing '*methodology*' as encompassing both theory and a tool for analysis, I am able see the important areas of the study, criticality and discourse, as methodologies, that is they bridge the gap between epistemology and the methods of data collection selected.

The above discussions made me consider in more depth the juxtaposition of epistemology, methodologies, specific methods of data collection. I have also argued for the importance of context to the study and the following table is an attempt to map the relations of these things within the study.

Table Three: Epistemology, methodology, data collections methods and context

Level	Main areas of focus	Significant contexts:
Epistemology	Donor aided reform of education as socially constructed and open to change	Relativist theories; Critical theory; Value systems of the researcher and researched
Methodologies	Discourse analysis Critical ethnomethodolgy	The social constructed nature of knowledge; Research as an emancipatory exercise
Broad methods of data collection	Critical discourse analysis Critical ethnography	Ideologies of the researcher and the researched
Specific methods of data collection	Observation, semi structured interview; unstructured conversation; textual analysis, and information gained through work in Lao PDR and other countries.	International and national political contexts, cultural, institutional, social and personal contexts

The table above shows the relationship of the data collection methods to epistemological stances and identifies contexts which have to be considered at all levels of study planning and implementation. The methodological areas indicated above and the supports they give to the study's implementation are explored in more depth in the next chapter.

2.3   Overview of study design

Having identified the research questions and the study's epistemological and ontological stances, I next looked at the planning and design of the study .This is a decision making process (LeCompte and Schensul 2012 p.81) taking into

account, she suggests, factors which include the broad area of study, the resources available to the researcher and constraints related to the particular contexts of study.

The approach to addressing the broad objective

As discussed in Chapter One, the study arose very particularly from my observations of the apparent inadequacy of the current procedures of development aid in Lao PDR in bringing about what I considered to be necessary change to many children's schooling in rural areas. To test this perception, the choice might have been to focus the study on the outcomes of donor-supported education reform on practice in selected rural schools, an action that would have given detailed understanding of teachers' responses to aspects of the reform that touched them. However, my experience in education development in Lao PDR has led me to believe that not all issues can be understood from consideration of the end product, that is, not all issues which show themselves in schools are the located in those schools. Ferguson (1994:17) gathered data from local people in Lesotho but described his study as *'not about the country or people of the study but the operation of international development in a particular setting'*. This reflects my approach. Ferguson also describes the structures of development as *'multi-layered, polyvalent and often contradictory'* matching my desire to understand the impact of donor-supported action at a number of levels. Another insight of relevance to the study by Ferguson (1994:10) is his view that the development community is attempting to create '*ideal worlds'*. He described the role of the

researcher as investigating how these ideal worlds are consistent with how real societies work. This resonates with the work of Teamey (2005) who identified gaps between idealised conceptualisations promoted by development agencies and local social practices and understandings. Her work is discussed further in Section 3.3 of this document.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:4) see the process of research design starting with questioning about a particular area of social life, arguing that typically ethnographers employ a relatively open-ended approach. They see the early stages of the research as exploratory leading to refining and possibly transforming the original questions. The same authors (p.24) advise the researcher of *'the need to work the research problem into a worthwhile and viable form'.* My approach was then to take a broad area and work it into a valuable and doable study.

Selection of data collection contexts

Specific field data collection activities took place in the three year period from 2008-2010. In Chapter One I noted that I have undertaken a number of contracts as a TA consultant in Lao PDR and in this time I spent some seven months in the country. I was faced with the question of where to start data collection for the study. I chose to start with opened-ended interviews with the staff of donor agencies. I wrote to all bilateral agencies, working in education in Lao PDR, to the UN agency most closely concerned with primary education development and to two development banks supporting education reform. The emails described the

broad area of research and asked for discussion of it. I interviewed staff of all the organisations which responded positively, that is 8 in all. I interviewed 12 donor officials, including one from a large international NGO, a personal contact. Each organisation chose the staff to be interviewed. One organisation provided a group of three officials, seeing discussion of research as a staff development opportunity.

The choice to start the study with the views of donor officials was made largely on pragmatic grounds, as I needed no permission to approach these agencies and needed no language support in interviews. The interviews confirmed the validity of the area of the study and proved powerful in identifying the issues constructed by donors. Themes running through the interviews were the organisations' concern for the effectiveness of their aid, the means of capacity development and the use of TA as well as discussion of their developing relationships with MoE. The advice given by donor officials on areas of interest to the study, such as the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) (discussed below), new projects in preparation, and key people to meet proved of value. Announcing the research in a relatively small community made it common knowledge, prompting further discussion in informal settings. This first round of interviews also helped me to focus questions relating to the central areas of concern of the study and the five research questions. I also interviewed 4 technical assistant consultants, 3 expatriate and 1 Lao.

The next act was to approach the MoE for permission to talk to officials and

teachers. At this point I was unsure of the Ministry's response. My application was supported by a brief outline of the research as I saw it at that time. Before undertaking the field study, I received the invitation from a participating donor official to attend the first ESWG meeting. This was another important event both in providing a context for detailed study and in further focussing the research questions and questions for semi-structured interview.

Field study

The MoE allowed the research and demanded a very detailed plan, with the designation of people I wanted to interview, content of interview, with times and places. I informed the MoE of the categories of people to interview in the Ministry, provincial and district education officials, teachers and my wish to observe classrooms, with the type social and geographical area to visit. I also developed the questionnaires for use in semi structured interview with respondents and engaged a Lao speaking research assistant at this time.

A number of factors helped to identify the field data collection sites. In a country in which travel is slow and difficult, the accessibility of rural field sites was an important consideration. Other criteria were:

- field officials and teachers had received in-service teacher training, administrative training and other capacity development events which were supported by donor agency aided programme;

- the research assistant was known to them;

- there was a road passable by car;

- they were in the main poor rural areas, with significant number of ethnic minority students, although semi urban areas (those around the district headquarters) were included, with an urban school

- there was a guest house.

Two rural districts of a province, whose provincial offices lie some 80 kilometres from the capital city, were decided upon, fulfilling the above criteria and agreed with the MoE. This allowed for interviews with the Provincial Education Officer (PEO), District Education Officers (DEO) and other field officials in the two districts, and work in eight schools (four in each district, relating to constraints explained below). Although the focus of the study was rural teachers, the MoE also encouraged me to visit the Deputy Provincial Officer at a Provincial Headquarters located near the capital city, that is, in a semi-rural area. Here I visited a school and interviewed a head teacher and three teachers. The difference in profile between rural and semi-rural schools is small, in terms of school buildings, school resources and methodologies. The difference lies in a slightly more affluent population, with a greater variety of occupations than the mainly agricultural dependence of the families of children in the rural schools[17].Time constraints prevented more than brief classroom visits. These actions added to the overall insights underpinning the study, and the views of head teachers and teachers are included in Chapter Seven, but specific classroom observations from the school are not included in the study. I was also

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[17] No statistical analysis is available to support this discussion

pointed by the MoE to visit a school they wanted to display as a *'good'* school in the capital city. Three teachers' and head teacher's comments are also analysed in Chapter Seven as they help to build a rounded picture of the response to the reform. This school visit gave me insight into the Ministry's aspiration for her schools.

Overall, I set the criteria for the sites for observations and interviews in rural areas but visited other schools on the advice of the MoE. The sample of schools was therefore 11 in total.

Resources and constraints

It was clear that the number of contexts inspected would be limited both by the permissions needed and my own work schedule. I chose to devote two weeks to the field work in rural areas. This did not match LeCompte's and Schensul's (2012:81) key principle that ethnography demands long term residence in the field settings but rather raised the question of what constitutes the context of a study. I took the education sector in Lao PDR as my context, seeing myself as having long term involvement in that context. To gain the deeper understanding and to begin to address my questions, I selected for investigation a series of contexts, which together would build a vehicle for reflection on the central issues and provide what Scott (2000a:3) sees as the matter of all studies, '*structural relations, interpretation by relevant social actors, relations between different structures, perceived relations of social actors, intentions of social actors, unintended*

consequences, structural influences and the degree of agential freedom'. This is similar to the approach adopted by Teamey in her work in Pakistan (2005) when addressing a number of constructing contexts.

The study design allowed me to address areas of interest raised during its implementation, for example, the investigation of the programme planning document was a response to the need to find out more about the origin and ubiquity of the discourse of lack of capacity. This is in line with Hammersley's (1993:125) view that research can be implemented as a spiral of understanding, each phase building on the learning of a previous one.

The full range of contexts was not fully under my control. For example I had hoped to interview high level ministry officials, to discuss their relationship with donors. However higher officials delegated the interviews to their juniors, to Director level or lower. Similarly some donor agencies offered interview with officials low in the hierarchy, mostly Lao citizens. The result was that, in interviews with both government and donor officials, there was a strong focus on issues of implementation. Though not planned, this provided valuable information in relation to the study's concerns.

In the rural schools, I chose to interview field officials and teachers and to observe teachers in action. The number of teachers in each school was defined by the decision to spend a day with the provincial education authority (including travel time), another with the local education officials and a day in each school. Which

teacher /class to observe was decided by the head teacher. All staff in these

schools had received in- service training through a project, which had since

closed. I believed the head teacher would want her staff to demonstrate what she

considered to be the school's best practice. A small sample cannot be seen as

comprehensive. The choice of approach was made, because, within the study's

constraints, a random sample promised insights into the choices the teachers

were making, when their teaching/learning methods were matched against what

they said in interview. By exploring the teachers' responses as one discourse of

an order of discourse, I was searching for illustrations of teachers' constructions of

meaning which were located in a frame wider than that of their immediate context.

The contexts of data collection

Two very important contexts for the study which surfaced during the research

were related to the public discourse and dissemination of policy. The design

therefore included investigation of semi-public dissemination through debate and

written documentation. Selected contexts of investigation were observation of two

ESWG meetings, with a lapse of eighteen months between and inspection of

policy and programme related documents. These were to form two significant

chapters of the study.

Before the commencement of the study, I had expected to find fairly clear cut

situations in which effectiveness could be identified and implications and remedies

identified, but, in practice, I found a very complex situation and it was necessary

to dig down through layers or levels of implementation to gain data on the ways donor aid to education reform is translated into practice. The approach may go against the advice normally given to researchers to keep the design simple, but was chosen to be more likely than a rigidly planned study to reveal and address significant factors.

Alongside the planned activities I was able to draw on a number of serendipitous sources of data, allowing a richer, broader based approach. The following is list of data collection events, other than the observation, semi-structured interview and document analysis described above:

- insights gained from work in development aid in Lao PDR in other places;

- time spent working in an MoE office;

- data from the ESQAC study; and

- numerous friendly conversations in Lao PDR and with development workers in a number of settings.

In summary the study design moved from a broad area of study to the investigation of specific contexts which addressed the research questions and together built to address the central issue. The choices were constrained by issues of resource and context, but within these constraints I believe the planned activities and the response to serendipitous opportunity together build a means to address issues concerned with responses to donor-supported aid on rural education in Lao PDR.

2.3.1 The places, events and people of the study

As shown above, the study data is gathered from both planned and serendipitous events during my time in Lao PDR. Particular attention is given to ideas and opinions gained through semi structured interview, because through these interviews I was able to explore the impact of donor-supported education reform on the actors who put actions associated with new policies into practice. To show the focus and range of the interviews, in the table below I lay out interviewees by type of organisation worked for, location, and whether Lao or non Lao. After this I discuss the range and origin of the interview questions.

Table Four: Participants in semi-structured interview

Number	Organisational role	Location	Lao/Non Lao
Respondents from donor agencies			
2	Officials of development banks	Vientiane	Lao
3	Officials of UN agencies	Vientiane	Lao
1	Official of a UN agency	Vientiane	Non Lao
4	Officials of bilateral agencies	Vientiane	Lao
1	Officials of a bilateral agency	Vientiane	Non Lao
1	Official of an INGO	Vientiane	Non Lao
Technical assistant consultants			
3	Technical Assistants	Vientiane	Non Lao
1	Technical Assistant	Vientiane	Lao
Respondents from Ministry of Education			
2	Directors	Vientiane	Lao
2	Deputy Directors	Vientiane	Lao
2	Officials in lower positions	Vientiane	Lao

	(implementing officials)		
Respondents who are field officials			
1	Provincial education officer	Rural area	Lao
1	Deputy provincial education officer	Province of semi urban and rural areas	Lao
1	Deputy education officers	Semi rural area	Lao
3	District education officers	Rural areas	Lao
6	Other DEB education officers	Rural areas	Lao
4	Professional assistants	Rural areas	Lao
Respondents in schools			
1	Head teacher	Semi urban area	Lao
1	Head teacher	Urban area	Lao
6	Head teachers	Rural areas	Lao
3	Teachers	Semi urban areas	Lao
3	Teachers	Urban area	
9	Teachers	Rural areas	Lao
Total number of interviewees: 61			

The list refers to respondents to semi-structured interviews for the study. The numbers do not include respondents who found difficulty in responding to the interview. One District Education Officer (DEO) brought in some 12 of his staff. This meeting is noted, but the full number not recorded, as they had little opportunity to contribute, an event further discussed in Chapter Seven.

The origin of the questions for semi structured interview

The areas of questioning were informed by issues raised during a round of interviews with donor representatives. These were open-ended interviews, with

the intention of seeing the reform processes from donor officials' point of view. The discussion raised the following issues: communication between donors and MoE; the ineffectiveness of capacity development activity and technical assistance; and slowness in implementation. These chimed with my own interests and form the basis of the research questions, with the addition of my concerns for emancipation/agency and theoretical method of investigation. The full set of questions is attached in Appendix One. Here I include a short example from the schedule of questions showing how an area of interest was translated into specific questions for different categories of respondent. Questions for the semi structured interviews were planned for three of respondent, with the expectation that their concerns may be different:

- high level government officials which were directors or director generals;

- lower level officials of MoE, responsible for implementation; and

- field officials who are DEB officials and teachers.

In Table Five below I show how area of capacity development/transfer of knowledges was addressed with the different groups.

Table Five: Questions to do with the transfer of knowledges

Category of respondent	Phrasing of question
Higher level MoE officials	How far are government officials prepared to implement planned changes? How effective is current capacity development activity? How far do you think TA consultants have been effective and what other strategies would you consider to be effective? What is your view of a good TA

	consultant?
Implementing officials of MoE	What training have you had for your role in the education reform? Has it been enough? What areas of knowledge and skill would you like to strengthen? Have you worked directly with international donors or TA? Have you found their input useful? Are international personnel easy to work with? What would you want to say to them to make the collaboration more effective? What is your view of a good TA consultant?
Field officials and teachers	Have you personally undertaken any training or other courses because of the reform? Have they helped you to develop your professional practice/understanding? What would you want to say to the people who organise training about what you need?

The question sheets were translated into Lao and distributed through Government channels to respondents ahead of time, though I noted that DEB officials normally carried them to schools at the time of the researcher's visit. There were opportunities, on a friendly basis, to review some comments from the MoE and the field with donor officials.

Conducting the semi structured interviews

The interviews with MoE and field official generally lasted about an hour. Permission was gained for recording and selected portions transcribed by the research assistant. The people expected would be less confident, in particular rural female teachers, were interviewed in groups. It should be noted that in the more illuminative interviews, the respondents used them to air their own thoughts and concerns and, in that case, they were not kept to the schedule. The

questionnaires were translated into Lao for non English speakers and were sent ahead.

2.4　Factors influencing the study's implementation

I look now at the practicalities of implementing the study. The language issues, whether translation was needed and how the interviews took place are of concern, as they impact on the quality of data collected and its interpretation and were considered in study planning. I look first at working with a research assistant who also acted as translator. Robinson-Pant (2005, Chapter 5) lays out the issues to do with working through translation. The following was my approach in the particular circumstances of this study.

Working with a research assistant/translator

Interviews in Lao were undertaken in collaboration with a research assistant, a native speaker of Lao. Working with a research assistant/ translator with an in-depth knowledge of Lao education was of particular importance not only for language support but because of her ability to enter into discussion in a respectful and sympathetic manner and to ensure I presented myself in an appropriate and effective manner.

I have known the research assistant for some years, both in professional and personal contexts. The approach to the interviews was planned in some depth.

On the advice of the research assistant, she gave quite a long introduction to the research and its purpose and also to me, my work, and my association with Lao PDR. On my querying the need for this, I was told, "*People in Lao need to know who you are as well as why you are here. Then they can decide how to work with you*'.

Before undertaking the interviews we discussed the approach and what I hoped to get from the interviews. The research assistant asked the questions and led the discussion. I was able to intervene if I wished to explore a point more fully. The interviews were taped and the selected passages translated by the research assistant. Her renderings are in non-standard English and rather than repeat her errors, I have presented them standard forms, with the emphasis on maintaining the meanings expressed.

The research assistant added value in that she was known to many of the respondents, having acted as teacher trainer in the two rural districts in which data was collected, a situation which eased communication. Because of her previous contact with the officials and teachers, follow up questions on implementing the '*new methodologies'* concerning the content of her training courses, were raised by respondents. I thought at first that this was a deviation from the purpose of the interviews. However I soon realised that I was learning a great deal about the issues faced by field workers in a more natural setting than was provided by the interview situation.

Strategies to reach understanding in translated interviews

The study takes the stance that what people say is both constructed by and constructing of political, personal and social contexts and perspectives. That the analyst brings interpretations is well documented (for example Scott 2000a34/35) and in the case of translated texts, the text is subject to yet another interpretation, that of the translator. A number of strategies were adopted to reach understanding of the respondents' intended meanings. Soon after the interviews the researcher and the translator sat together to review the interviews and to resolve unclear passages. The following is an example. Teachers consistently used a word translated as *'bolder'* in response to questions of children's changed behaviour, for example a head teacher told us in interview through the translator, *'Since the new methods the children are bolder now'*. I discussed with the translator what the word *bolder* signified and it remained uncertain. In a subsequent interview a head teacher used the word again and we asked if she could give examples of what it meant. On reflection she answered, '*They now speak up; they ask questions and give opinions, even in front of adults. You know Lao children are usually very passive but now they are more active'.* In this way understandings were developed and confirmed between the researcher and the research assistant and where necessary with an interviewee.

I also found that that, in interviews which take place in a cultural setting through a third party, particular emphasis is placed on contextual cues. These are important to all interviewers, but take on particular significance in the interviews in a cultural

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context not your own. I observed Lao styles of politeness, because they both construct and reflect social relationships. The Lao language not only demands the selection of a suitable honorific to address the respondent, but also to refer to oneself. In this way, to refer to oneself as '*mother*' creates a different social relationship than the honorific 'professor'. Both the translator and I chose to refer to ourselves as '*adjan*', the honorific for a teacher, both because it signified a professional relationship and because it set us in a respected but approachable position in the social hierarchy.

I paid attention to my body language during the interview. Holding the head high suggests claiming high status and therefore may create a gap between the interviewee and interviewer. Placing the head lower gives honour to the respondent, but too low would reduce the seriousness and professionalism of the interviewer. Observing these politenesses established the researcher within already understood social relationships and created those conducive to frank discussion. This relates to the work of Labov (especially 1977) who undertook interviews with speakers of non-standard English. He documents, amongst other approaches, his attention to body language and messages it gives, in particular when the respondent is likely to construct the interviewer as 'other', or 'outsider'.

Most, though not all, respondents were unrelaxed at the beginning of the interview. They had been instructed to attend and could have had little idea of what it was about. During interview most, though not all, became more relaxed, which I identified by their changed sitting position, longer answers to questions,

and the offering of information rather than simply responding to questions. The introduction of jokes and laughter by the participants suggested an increasingly open discussion. In an interview with a group of three teachers, in an urban setting, they became quite naughty and joked about the expectations of their head teacher.

Classroom observations

I was able to observe eight lessons by different teachers, each of 40 minutes, three of mathematics, three of Lao language and two the World About Us (WAU).Grade Three was selected as in each school as by this grade the children can be expected to be accustomed to school life; to have made some academic progress and are less likely than the younger children to be thrown by the presence of strangers. Also the teachers of the first two grades were coming to terms with implementing a new curriculum.

I was accompanied to the school by officials from the local district education bureau (DEB). I was introduced to the head teacher and staff by the research assistant. As in interviews she gave an introduction of some length, explaining the purpose of the research and giving an overview of my previous work in Lao PDR, stressing the period of time over which I had known the country with examples of the work I had done. I followed this with a short speech in Lao saying how pleased I was to be there and thanking them for their hospitality. I found this powerful in establishing a relationship and making respondents aware that they could speak

to me directly. I made a point of talking to the teachers whose classrooms I would be observed, where possible. It should also be noted that since the schools had been supported by a donor-supported project, visits from project associated people, both Lao and foreign was not unusual. The research assistant being known in the area was an important step in closing the gap between the researcher and the research. The rationale for the research was stressed, and those we met told that we were not there in an evaluative role, but to genuinely understand how schools worked and the issues teachers face in classroom teaching. The Lao word '*banha'* was used. It is often translated as problem or issue but has less negative connotation in Lao than English.

I asked to observe classrooms before undertaking interviews, to get some idea of the functioning of the school which would help select which questions to stress and help me understand the answers. As it turned out the teachers interviewed were not always those whose classes I had observed, because I strictly observed order of precedent, talking first, where appropriate, to the village head and members of the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) and to head teachers. Some teachers had to leave to undertake the other duties, which included minding their own children, farming, and/or small shop or restaurant keeping. In four cases the women teachers were required to cook a meal for us as guests.

I asked for the research assistant and myself to attend the class by ourselves, as I had noted in classroom observations on previous occasions for other reasons,

that officials may conduct other important business in the classroom, also to reduce the impact of the number of external people. The teacher was asked to introduce us to the children as guests and we took a seat at the back of the class, out of the children's sight, only looking at children's note books or talking to them at the end of the session. As a teacher I am aware of the limitations of observations under these conditions in particular the artificiality of the situation and the teacher and children's difficulty in behaving normally under the circumstances. However, I found the observations productive. The teachers' self-esteem was safe guarded to the greatest possible extent. I give more detail of how observations were conducted in Chapter Seven.

2.5   Ethical and practical aspects that make the study doable

The political nature of the area of study is noted, both in macro and micro contexts. The macro contexts of the study are, on the one hand, the policy, practice and aspiration of a socialist country, with donor policy and aspiration on the other. Scott (2000b:3) notes *'Educational knowledge is embedded within micro-political systems';* in terms of the study, these are notably government offices and school politics, as well as the contexts of social positioning and preferment.

In this section I link practical and ethical issues because the ethical issues raised here have had practical impact on the choices made during the study's implementation. The study conforms to the University of Birmingham's Code of

Practice for Research, revised for 2011-2012 and I quote the six principles of the

Economic and Social Research Council Framework (ESRC) Research Ethics

Framework (2005 updated 2010), because I go on to discuss the difficulty in

ensuring adherence to Numbers 2 and 4 of the Framework and discuss the

attention that I paid to ensure Number 5.

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and

quality.

2. Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods

and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails

and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific and

exceptional research contexts.

3. The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity

of respondents must be respected

4. Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion

5. Harm to research participants must be avoided

6. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or

partiality must be explicit.

The research adheres to all points but those discussed below have required

special attention.

Point 2 of ESRC guidelines: gaining informed consent

There are a number of issues concerned with gaining informed consent in a

country in which there is a relative lack of understanding of research and its

purposes and in which erroneous motives may be attributed to the foreigner.

Research is a known and accepted activity in western academic society, creating an obligation on organisations to cooperate and this was honoured by donor agencies, though, it is important to note, with little enthusiasm, minimum cooperation and a certain amount of suspicion. An example is given of the response of a non Lao donor official who, when requested for interview, asked '*is this official or informal?*' and, apparently unable to resolve her stance, ultimately refused interview. High level donor officials declined interview, but provided their junior colleagues with the result that many of the donor officials I interviewed were Lao nationals. This is itself in gave me an insight into the power hierarchies within donor organisations, as well as adding an informed dimension to the discussion, as the respondents were able to reflect effectively on the issues faced by GoL as well as those of the donor, bringing a very rounded understanding of the situation.

In Lao PDR, research has been introduced in teacher education colleges in the last three to four years. Until then research has traditionally the province of a small University elite. The notion of research qua research has not been a part of the educational experience of most of the people I interviewed. Previous contact with expatriate researchers would almost certainly be project related as an aspect of project identification, planning or evaluation, that is a part of a process which may ultimately bring benefit to the area. Although attention was given to alerting respondents to the nature of the study and the intention of the researcher, there is doubt whether this fully overrode previous understandings. In fact each head

teacher concluded the interview with a list of the school's material needs. Whether this was caused by the attempt to normalise the encounter; in the spirit of '*it's worth a try'* or whether they had misinterpreted the situation I cannot tell.

Point 4 of ESRC guidelines: ensuring voluntary participation

In a situation in which MoE permission is needed to undertake the study, the voluntary nature of participation is in doubt. Although trouble was taken to explain the research and its purposes, it is unlikely that the words overrode the nature of the visit, which may have been constructed as official. In fact the process of government permission, official stamped letters, visits accompanied by local government officials, even in one district, by an armed, local security officer, I felt may have outweighed my protestations. To decide whether it was ethical to include this material, I looked at what Scott has to say (2000a:2). He warns education researchers to beware of making the mistake that '*knowledge of educational institutional and systems is value free'* that is in all cases respondents have to position themselves within the values of their organisation and in any circumstance the response of any of those interviewed will be influenced by their own perception of the context, their perceptions of the motives of the interviewer, the image they wish to portray of themselves, of their competence and so on. Thus I was working in a situation which related to but was an extreme version of something all researchers face, in that all research takes place in contexts in which people bring their own political and value systems, as well as their own agendas. I include the material on the following grounds:

- the ESCR guidelines allow some variation for special contexts. I suggest research in a socialist country falls into this category;

- great care was taken to avoid risk to the participants, as is outlined below;

- there is no other way to collect the data. To attempt to do so without government permission would place citizens in a risky situation; and

It should be noted that that government permission for me to undertake the research also permitted the respondents to take part in discussion, to some extent providing a licence for free exchange of opinions.

Point 5 of ESRC guidelines: avoiding harm to research participants

The interviews were conducted in ways that avoided harm to participants. During data collection activity, questions were phrased in an open-ended way that allowed the respondent to enter into discussion and give as much or little information as they felt comfortable to do. The interview transcripts reveal that most, though not all interviewees entered into discussion confidently and were surprisingly open in their answers. I noted only two officials who were clearly discomforted; a DEO who called all his staff to the interview, a situation diagnosed by the research assistant as avoiding any accusation of politically inappropriate comment, and a head teacher who could not engage and only reported what would normally be required of him, that is the numbers of children, teachers etc. Both interviews were concluded quickly but politely.

I also note that the very fact of opening areas of discussion and asking stakeholders to reflect on the reform activities may have consequences for them by encouraging reflection.

Maintaining confidentiality

In the write up of the study I have taken pains to avoid identification of respondents. This has posed problems in a country in which a foreigner's movements are likely to be noted and the MoE has a small staff and permission was needed to interview people. However to avoid identification in the text I have referred to people only by status, that is, a director, a deputy director, a DEB official, a teacher without naming the MoE department, or the province or region. To avoid identification of officials I have referred employing agencies as a UN agency, a development bank or a bilateral donor.

Government policies and project related documents, inspected or quoted in the research, are either in the public domain, or I gained permission for their use. However to find the ownership of some documentation and who gives permission for its use proved a challenge. It was not clear who gives permission to use the minutes of meetings associated with donor meetings and different members took different stances. For example I was given the minutes of the informal donor education meetings by a group member while another member made a point of confidentiality. In Chapter Four I give an example of GoL and donor officials taking different stances to confidentiality of the ESWG meeting. I addressed such

dilemmas by careful checking and, if permission remained unclear, avoiding their direct use.

A number of comments deriving from professional situations and friendly conversations are included. Permission was gained from the speakers whose utterances occurred during the period of the research, with promise that their identities would be obscured, normally saying something like, '*That's an interesting point. Do you mind if I use it for my study?* Permission was never refused. I was normally able to record these significant statements soon after, to ensure accurate portrayal.

Moral obligation of the researcher

Working in a country not one's own raises moral, ethical and practical issues above and beyond those addressed in one's own society, because political, social and cultural factors may not be fully understood. Scheyvens, Nowak and Scheyvens (2003:139) suggest that, '*Doing ethical research in a foreign country is about building mutually beneficial relationships with people you meet in the field and about acting in a sensitive and respectful manner'.* While the critical stance of this study is predicated on emancipation, which can be interpreted as seeking a beneficial relationship, I also take note of what de Laine (2000:24) says. She points out that behaving morally and ethically in fieldwork presents considerable challenge and makes demands on the researcher's underlying moral and ethical codes:

The conditions of fieldwork (paradoxes, ambiguities and dilemmas)....that put the researcher in direct contact with people to form various types of relationships (power, personal and social), make field work inherently problematic. Ethical and moral dilemmas are an occupational work hazard of fieldwork that the researcher cannot plan for, but nonetheless must be addressed on the spot, by drawing on values, ideals, ethical codes, moral and professional standards, intuitions and emotions.

Moreover, actors in donor aided education reform in Lao PDR stand in differing relations to the interventions and can be expected to have different constructions of their own needs and interests in relation to reform activity. In consequence, the researcher's obligations may vary from group to group of those researched. Acting in a sensitive and respectful manner may be considered as a given for all successful research. However, researching a country other than one's own demands flexibility and informed response to the inevitable ethical and moral dilemmas attendant on fieldwork.

2.6 Conclusion to the chapter

Chapter Two has ranged widely over the contextual factors affecting the study design and implementation. These include the broad objective of the study and the more detailed research questions; the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher, and the links between these and the study methodology, the study's original design and adaptations made in response to a fluid situation. I

also looked at the practical and ethical contexts of the study.

The focus of this chapter has been the rationale for the means and purposes of data collection. In the next chapter I identify the literature and theoretical contexts which provide the thinking tools to support the study and provide the tools for data analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXTS OF THE STUDY

3.0   Overview of the chapter

Having established the international and national contexts of the study in Chapter One and the epistemological and ontological contexts of the study in Chapter Two I go on to look at the theoretical and literature contexts which define the study and to support its implementation. In this chapter I establish a view of discourse and its analysis appropriate to the study, drawing largely on critical theory expressed in critical ethnomethodology and critical discourse analysis. I then look at a broad spectrum of the work of commentators on development aid and education reform, and follow this with review of literature related to the specific areas of interest of the study.

3.1   Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis

In the previous chapter I established discourse analysis as a suitable methodology for the study. '*Development discourse'* and the '*discourse of development'* are taken for granted terms in the literature of development aid; examples include the writing of Parfitt (2002), Mosse (2004) and Karagiannis (2004). Here I look more

closely at the implications of the choice.

I refer firstly to the work of Robinson-Pant (2001:311-329) who creates an argument for addressing development aid as discourse, because it allows a broad look at the wide factors that impact on the practical implementation of development aid. She says that *'the concept of development as discourse implies more than simply 'development speak', but provides a way to analyse relationships around power and knowledge'*. Other insights she brings to the study are the numbers and range of discourses that go to make up development aid, their overlap and the tensions between competing discourses. She also indicates a wide range of questions to be asked and people to be considered when she says, '*instead of suggesting that a certain policy succeeds or fails in 'technical terms', policy makers can then begin to ask different questions, which acknowledge political agendas of the various development partners and allow for a greater variety of voices.*'

As acknowledged by the passages quoted above, discourse is a broad concept and in order to put the research into practice it was necessary to adopt a view of discourse which facilitates the study's practical application.

3.1.1 Establishing a view of discourse

Until this point I have used the term discourse as if it were one thing with an agreed meaning. However Schriffin (1994:1) argues that, '*discourse ...remains a*

vast and somewhat vague subfield of linguistics', indicating that it is not a single body of knowledge but a number of related activities. The word discourse is subject to interpretation and viewed and used differently by different theorists. I am grateful to Coupland and Jaworski (1999:1) for bringing together 12 definitions of discourse by various commentators. To illustrate the range of interpretations in use, I reproduce just two, selected because they are related directly to the objectives of the study.

The first quoted is that given by Candlin (1997: iv) who views discourse as '*language in use'*, giving it a dynamic role as both constructive of and constructed by social practices. Another important insight is the relation he identifies between language, social situation and over-arching social formations.

> Discourse ... refers to language in use, as a process which is socially situated. However we may go on to discuss the constructive and dynamic role of both written and spoken discourse in structuring areas of knowledge and the social and institutional practices that are associated with them. In this sense discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds and by doing so both reproduces and constructs afresh social-discursive practices constrained and encouraged by more macro movements in the over-arching social formation.

Since one theme of the study is the transfer of knowledge, Candlin's view of discourse as a constructing force of both knowledge and social practice is highly relevant. The view links to Foucault's (1972) view of knowledge, which he

describes as both validating and created by societal power structures. A discourse, Foucault argues, has the power not only to select what is true, but also has the power to bring things into being and construct them as true.

The second commentator I quote from Coupland and Jaworski in Fairclough (1992:8), who also stresses the constructive nature of discourse and places emphasis on the power relations expressed in discourse. He adds something of particular value to the study when he says:

> Discourse *constitutes* the social....Discourse is shaped by relations of power and invested with ideologies.

Later in the same book he adds a point important for the study that discourse is not just illuminative of social practice, but is itself social practice. He says:

> 'Discourse' for me is more than *just* language use: it is, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice (p.28).

Scott (2000a:32) adds another dimension of importance to the study when he describes discourse as '*real*', because it works as a force which operates outside other reproducing or transforming activity. He goes on to suggest that it has to be addressed and understood through its influence on action. I take this to indicate that reflection on what people say, do or write illuminates the social, political and cultural forces at work. Scott (2000b: 142) further suggests that in a practical area such as education, research is always concerned to theorise practice. As such the researcher cannot avoid making judgments and must acknowledge pre-existing

belief systems which define some ways of doing things and some outcomes as better than others. This is an important insight for all researchers but one which takes on particular significance when researching, in a culture other than one's own, into what Bourdieu (1990) calls '*strong discourses'*, that is those backed by political and financial power and, as I discuss later in the thesis, refer to foundational values.

Having identified broad approaches above, I am posed the problem of how to establish a view of discourse appropriate to the study. I first came across the notion of discourse and its analysis through the works of Foucault, (above), Austin (1962), Halliday (1978), Bernstein (1990) and many more, and used it as a means to analyse texts produced between teacher and children[18.] However the study must take other approaches to the texts of non native English speakers, translated texts in a situation of multi-directional power relations.

Fairclough (2003a:12) divides approaches to discourse analysis into those which *'include detailed analysis of texts .., and approaches which don't'*. The research questions are largely concerned with uncovering power structures and the ways they facilitate actors in education reform to take agency. In this case, the study places less emphasis on detailed analysis of texts than the ability of texts to reveal instances of the exercise of power within social structures.

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[18] Baby Wasn't Accident: Bilingual Learners in the Mainstream Classroom - Integrated Approaches to the Teaching and Learning of English as a Second Language. (1990) Ed. Levine J., Falmer and Language and Literacy in the Primary School (Meek, C. Mills eds)

I adopt a view of discourse as something that wields power, is dynamic and therefore open to change and which both reflects and creates social and institutional practices. It has ideological dimensions with power to construct and validate knowledge (Foucault) and is understood through its impact (Scott). As discussed in the previous chapter, a critical approach is selected for the study and the view of discourse identified above is close to that critical discourse analysis (CDA) as proposed by Fairclough (see especially 1999 and 2003a).

3.2   The work of critical theorists in relation to the study

At this point I look at the work and ideas of three significant proponents of critical approaches, Fairclough, Habermas and Giddens.

3.2.1 Fairclough

Fairclough acknowledges that his work in CDA is built on, amongst others, the work of Habermas and Giddens. He also draws on the social theories of Foucault and Bourdieu's views of discourse, seeing discourse as an irreducible part of reality. Bourdieu (1991:71) remarks on the '*constant endeavour on the part of those who have power to try to impose an ideological common sense which holds for everyone'.* Fairclough sets critical awareness and ability to reflect on discourse as a defence against those who would impose, '*ideological common sense'.* He also argues that critical awareness is not something extraordinary but a part of the normal way people go about their lives. He agrees with Habermas and Giddens

that the recipient alone or in groups can take some form of agency, but he argues more strongly than either Habermas or Giddens that the ordinary person's ability to critique is often limited by failure of information, a view returned to a number of times in the study.

Fairclough offers an essentially relativist view of discourses of change, that is, they should be evaluated in relation not to a notion of the best or ideal, but by the extent to which they allow people to improve the way they do things. This insight focuses questions for the study on what is identified in Lao PDR as improvement to education and the bases on which the decisions are made.

I reproduce Fairclough's (1985:740) own words in which he sums up his view of power structures as expressed by discourses within social institutions:

> I view social institutions as containing diverse 'ideological-discursive formations' (IDFs) associated with different groups within the institution. There is usually one IDF which is clearly dominant. Each IDF is a sort of 'speech community' with its own discourse norms but also, embedded within and symbolized by the latter, its own 'ideological norms'. Institutional subjects are constructed, in accordance with the norms of an IDF, in subject positions whose ideological underpinnings they may be unaware of. A characteristic of a dominant IDF is the capacity to 'naturalize' ideologies, i.e. to win acceptance for them as non-ideological 'common sense'.

The above overview offers a means to address the concerns of the study. The identification of the dominant ideological-discursive formations will be significant,

with the ideologies which have the power to '*naturalize*' elements of change. The process of acceptance and rejection of those elements is the stuff of the study. A constant theme of the research is how far the processes of education reform allow people to become knowledgeable and to take agency within changing structures.

Fairclough (2001:2) lays stress on the power of ideology, which he regards as common sense assumptions, to legitimise social relationships and differences in power. Of interest to the study is the ways the interventions supported by development aid impact on existing ideologies and practice and how they are perceived and responded to by actors standing in differing relations to the changes.

Orders of discourse

I have previously discussed donor aided education reform as composed of many discourses. Fairclough also uses the phrase '*orders of discourse'* (see especially Fairclough 1992, 2003, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) to describe the network of related social practices with its linguistic variables that go to make up a social discourse. If I see education reform in Lao PDR as an order of discourse, I can regard it as made up of numerous contributory discourses, which may look to differing practical and ideological justifications. An order of discourse describes an overarching structure, a complex network which encompasses differing discourse types related to a powerful discourse and can be seen as the product of the number of discourses, which include national and international stances; policy

documents; reports and evaluation schemes, community meetings and classroom practice. Of interest to the study is the relationship between the constituent discourses, in particular, the meanings they create when they rub together. Thus an order of discourse is made up of a number of social fields, which are '*characterised in terms of the shifting boundaries and flows between them*' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999:58), an insight which emphasises the point that donor aided educational reform is not a static monolithic institution, but one with constantly shifting parameters, the boundaries moving in response to new information and new contexts, and is therefore open to change.

By seeing donor aided education reform in Lao PDR as an order of discourse, I avoid the trap of analysing education reform on the one hand as a monolithic structure, a stance adopted by post development theorists[19] or on the other hand as a dualistic structure in which the needs and interests of GoL are set in opposition to those of donor agencies. Much of the literature on development aid records the views, problems and issues as perceived by donor agencies and development organisations. If donor-supported education reform is addressed as an order of discourse, the discourses of donor agencies and GoL and its downstream organisations can be addressed as a total construct, with constraints and difficulties not laid at the door of individual institutions but in the relationships between them.

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[19] See in particular Escobar (1995), Esteva (1992) and Rahnema, Majid and Bawtree Victoria eds ,The Post Development Reader (1997

Fairclough (2003a:3) establishes a practical approach to evaluating discourses. He says that:

> Evaluating discourse means setting them against shifting understandings of what material possibilities there are in the practical, domain concerned activity. In such practical contexts, discourses are not evaluated in terms of some impossible 'absolute truth', but in terms of epistemic gain - whether they yield knowledges which allow people to improve the way things are done.

CDA provides a basis for procedures of analysis of texts generated by the study (see especially Fairclough 2001 Chapters 5 and 6). The specific nature of the study, with texts produced by non native speakers of English and with translated texts has required considerable adjustment of these tools. The use of these tools is considered in detail in the data analysis chapters.

3.2.2 Habermas

In this subsection I look briefly at the work of Habermas. He offers a model of human agency in societies in times of change. I draw on the work of Thomassen (2010) and Kim (2009) who have offered interpretations of Habermas's work and I look at two aspects of Habermas's work particularly relevant, the theory of communicative action (TCA), and the associated notion of lifeworld.

The theory of communicative action is based in a view that a discourse is produced by communicative events and is an inter-subject phenomenon (Parfitt

2002:60). Thomassen (2010) emphasises the importance of language to Habermas's approach and locates his work amongst linguistic theorists, noting the relationship of his work to that of Wittgenstein (1953), Garfinkel (1967), Austin (1962) and Searle (1979). Thomassen identifies Habermas's view of utterance as made up of a series of speech acts, with meaning located not only in what is said but also in the ways it is said. In discourse, meanings are created, examined, accepted or rejected, emphasising that meaning emerges from the debate. People bring a range of abilities and knowledges to the debate and they draw on custom and cultural traditions. In discourse they construct identities, define situations, coordinate action, and create social solidarity. Habermas, interpreted by Thomassen proposes a view of change that through reflexivity, people deliberate matters of concern and respond to cultural and technological change by creative and joint reworking of their inherited cultural resources.

As an aspect of TCA, the lifeworld is seen as the set of competences, practices, and attitudes that make up the agent's cognitive horizon (Thomassen 2010:72). It allows for the exercise of informal, culturally-grounded understandings and the development of meanings through mutual and agreed accommodations. In this way change can be discussed, evaluated and adapted to through group action. Habermas sets a model of an ideal situation in which social coordination and systemic regulation are constructed from shared practices, beliefs, values and structures of communicative interaction and government is by consent and consensus. In an ideal situation educational reform would be the product of informed debate rather than imposed by powerful forces. In an ideal speech

situation actors are equally endowed with information and capacity in discussion, participants are socially equal and speech is undistorted by ideology or misrecognition (Thomassen, 2010:88). In this case information flows freely between the lifeworld and social structures and there is a reciprocal relationship, each influencing the other. Of particular interest to this study is Habermas's articulation of a major concern of the power wielded by strong discourses. Bourdieu (1991) describes strong discourses as those of powerful institutions, bureaucracies, market forces and, in the context of this study, development aid. Habermas argues that such strong discourses distort communicative actions and 'colonise' the life world. The power of the strong discourses, in particular, government policy, globalisation and donor aid are of particular interest to the study.

Habermas's views have received criticism. His failure to acknowledge the power of mass media and global communications is cited by Thompson (1989). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue that since access to power and skills are not equal and have never been equal, the value of an ideal speech situation is in doubt and, in discourse, weight is inevitably in favour of the more powerful individuals or institutions. Kim (2009) suggests that Habermas's theories are claimed as emancipatory, yet he fails to describe a convincing mechanism that links theory to changed practice. These perceptions are explored in the study as is the relation of Habermas' construction of ideal communicative situations to the Lao situation which limits discussion and information.

Habermas has provided valuable insights for this study. He points to the need to explore the links between field level action and the strong discourses and between social theory and practice. He also offers a model of agency that even in the face of powerful forces, allows actors some space for action. Just how much agency can be claimed in the Lao situation is the stuff of the study.

3.2.3 Giddens

In this section I discuss the work of Giddens, who acknowledges his debt to the work of Habermas. His particular contribution to the thinking of the study is his construction of the relationship between structure and agency. I looked in particular at his book *Central Problems in Critical Theory* (1994), because it reflects his concern to describe institutional impact at times of change and because of his attempts to reflect on the way everyday and personal life is reshaped at those times. Giddens (1994:174-8), makes connections between the 'micro' aspects of society, that is individuals' internal sense of self and identity, and the 'macro' aspects of the state (otherwise the strong discourses), multinational capitalist corporations, and globalisation.

Structuration theory is the main vehicle for Giddens' reflection. He pays particular attention to the relationship between agency and structure, that is, the ways actions of individuals relate to the structural features of society. Of significance is his examination of the dualism of structure and agency. Structure, he argues, gives form and shape to social life, but it is not itself the form and shape: structure

exists only in and through the activities of human agents (Giddens 1984:256). Giddens rejects structure as something pre-existing or external in form. Similarly, agency is not within the individual, but rather is located in the patterning of people's speech and actions between them. Giddens' notion of structure and agency emphasises the ways action is conditioned by existing cultural structures. At the same time, those structures are created and recreated through the enactment process. Giddens (1994: Chapter Two) suggests that while the structural properties of societies and social systems are real, they have no physical existence; instead, they depend upon regularities of social reproduction. This links to Scott's (2000a:32) view, quoted above, that discourse is addressed by the action it produces. In this way Giddens offers a view of structure which is dependent on people's action for its continuation and every time the routines are not continued, or existing forms rejected, the structure is challenged, if only to a very small degree.

Giddens sees people as socialised into existing social structures, but at the same time, those structures are modified by people's activity. In this way social structures provide boundaries to human behaviour; provide the tools for its development and at the same time provide an arena for the practice of human activity. Giddens' theory emphasises how the agent's day to day life has the character of repetition and routine and explains the ways the agent draws upon the social structures as a behavioural resource. The importance to the study is that his views allow me to consider the discourse of educational reform as open to influence and change, rather than as a rigid, unchanging structure. Where those

influences originate, which people's activity is most influential in modifying activity and the means by which they assert that influence is of interest to the study.

Giddens regards the human being as knowledgeable, and therefore capable of impacting on her environment (Giddens 1984:163). Cohen (1989:189) describes Giddens as '*anchoring himself in a hermeneutic philosophy of science*' which '*makes humans knowledgeable and reflexive, and can therefore always change their behaviour*'. The importance of this insight to the study is that actors in donor aided education reform are seen to be knowledgeable. The ways they knowledge is expressed, built on and valued is a concern of the study with investigation of the extent to which actors can impose their own views in the face of a strong discourse of education reform.

Giddens' theories have attracted criticism. Fairclough and Chouliaraki (1999:82) criticise Giddens on the grounds that he underestimates the power of the strong discourses and overestimates the influence that stakeholders can bring to bear. They argue that Giddens gives too much weight to power as a resource for individual action while underplaying the constraints it brings. Kilminster (1991:99) argues that structuration has power as a theoretical synthesis, that is, a recombination that produces a novel fusion, developed from hermeneutics or interpretive sociology, functionalism, and structuralism but, in line with Kaspersen (2000:158), argues that while Giddens is reasonable and fruitful in many contexts, it is doubtful whether his method entails theoretical innovation. Equally Cohen (1989:2) claims that structuration theory does not provide a method of theory

construction, but argues that '*it provides ontological resources for the formulation of empirically oriented theory and research'*. Giddens (1984:326-7) himself has argued that the concepts *'should for research purposes be regarded as sensitizing devices, useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results'.* I have certainly found them so.

As a sensitising device, structuration theory is important to the study in that it views actors in education reform as active agents rather than passive recipients. Giddens' discussion of the themes of self-identity and reflexivity (esp.1984, 1991 and 1992) allows insight into the relationship between human agency and social structure and offers the study the possibility of a multifaceted analysis of a situation and describing relationships and modes of communication between macro and micro levels of social institutions, offering a means of tracing connections between micro-sociological incidents of social action and macro-sociological explanations of ways that societies are shaped.

3.2.4 Bourdieu and Foucault

Bourdieu's views link to the understandings Fairclough brings to the study, by arguing that discourse should not be seen only as a site of reproduction of existing power relations and ideologies, but also as a site of power struggle. Bourdieu suggests that through interdiscursivity, old conventions can be reviewed and may eventually give way. This is a view which relates closely to the study's exploration of the ways existing norms - political, ideological and practical - are changing and

whether people subvert or embrace the new systems and practices.

Bourdieu's recognition of the power of cultural, social and symbolic capital may also have significance for the study. Bourdieu notes the importance of the above capitals to all societies. However, in a society such as Lao PR, in which the maintenance of 'face' is a dominant motivation, the notion of gaining and maintaining capitals is an important element in power relations. His construction of symbolic violence may provide a means to investigate those who gains status and who loses out at a time of reform.

Foucault has already been mentioned in this chapter in connection with the construction and transfer of knowledge. He has played a significant role in thinking about development aid, because the post development theorists based their critique of development on Foucault's early theorising. I also look further to Foucault's views of the relation of knowledge to power to illuminate the impact of new knowledge on existing and predicted power structures.

While these were the major writers to be utilised, the thoughts of other theorists will be drawn on to address issues as they arise on the study. The question for the study becomes whether they can be melded together to make a coherent theory and methodology that supports the analysis of reform in a non-western, developing country.

3.3   Further areas of concern to the study

As well as the work of the specific theorists discussed above, a broad range of literature is available to support the study. I briefly review some literature pertaining to areas of the study's concern.

3.3.1 Lao PDR and development aid

Lao PDR has in the past not attracted a great deal of academic research in education. Existing studies include the World Bank supported study by Benveniste '*Teaching in Lao PDR'* (2007), Fox's work (2003) on gender attitudes in rural areas and the six Operational Studies produced for the Second Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP II) (2002-2008, extended to 2010). These studies together with Phraxayavong's (2009) overview of development in Lao PDR and a collection of MA studies undertaken by Lao officials supported by the University of Stockholm, edited by Sungren (2008) have provided valuable contextual information.

The study also required attention to documents of MoE, Lao PDR, which include policy and strategy documents as well as project related documents. Donor agencies also produce a wealth of documentation which includes overall policy and strategy papers, in country position papers and country strategy plans.

In addition a canon of literature relating to issues raised by development aid is

produced by United Nations organisations, unilateral and bilateral donors, development banks and INGOs. As examples I mention UNESCO's documents on capacity development and the World Bank's on corruption. Such documents provide a very useful means to identify what donors see as current issues and their suggestions for practical approaches to address them.

A further area is the work of commentators on development who include Riddell (2008), Chambers (2005, 2008), Parfitt (2002), King (1991, 2002) and King and McGrath (2002), Robinson-Pant (2000, 2005), and Vulliamy (1990). While these commentators are not writing about Lao PDR, they raise issues which are common to development aid and allow me to relate those arising in Lao PDR to discussion and solutions in other contexts and cultures.

The recognition that many commentators are based in the western world encouraged me to seek out the writings of commentators whose origins are not in the western world and can be expected to bring significantly different perspectives. These include Spivak (2009), Said (1983), Kim (sometimes called Kyung) (2009), and those broadly referred to post-developmental theorists identified earlier in the chapter.

3.3.2 Critiques of development aid

A question the researcher must ask in undertaking work in development aid is whether, in what might appear to be a flawed system, it is appropriate to

undertake studies which act to imply there can be improvements of the current practice which would make it benign, rather than rejecting it wholesale and looking for radical alternatives. To address this issue I looked at critiques of development aid and reflect on the position of Lao PDR.

The post development theorists are referred to a number of times in this study. Arising in the eighties, the post development critique (encapsulated by writers such as Escobar [1995], Esteva [1992] and Rahnema, Majid and Bawtree Victoria [eds 1997]) holds that the drive towards '*modern development'* is generated by a specific and unacknowledged political and economic ideology. As a socially constructed approach, it is guided by western interests and reflects the pattern of western hegemony. Development aid, through bank, bilateral and multilateral interventions, takes western economic structure and society as a universal model. This group of theorists regards the concept of development aid as obsolete or bankrupt and argues that the practice of development has done more harm than good. Criticism of such a view (for example Pieterse [2000] and Nustad [2001]) relates, largely, not to their analysis, but to the lack of a proposed alternative.

The prominent analyst Moyo (2009) from a long body of work also concludes that development aid is not only ineffective, but positively damaging. Discussing aid to Africa she argues, '*It's time to stop pretending that the aid-based development model currently in place will generate sustained economic growth in the world's poorest countries. It will not'*. Noting the deterioration in basic indicators of literacy, life expectancy and income in some African states, she concludes:

> *aid is defined as the sum total of both concessional loans and grants. It is these*
>
> *billions that have hampered, stifled and retarded Africa's development ... The*
>
> *problem is that aid is not benign – it's malignant. No longer part of the potential*
>
> *solution, it's part of the problem – in fact aid is the problem (Kindle Location 1200).*

She sees aid as fuelling inflation, eroding social capital, weakening institutions and reducing much-needed domestic investment. Her arguments are made on economic grounds. She argues that as governments become aid dependent, with aid flow regular and ongoing, policymakers fail to look for better ways of financing their country's longer-term development. She creates an alternative scenario for Africa's development, based in the withdrawal of external aid over five to ten years, and implementation of such actions as the establishment or reinvigoration of bond markets, promoting trade and adopting the procedures of the Grameen Bank[20], which extends credit to the very poor. A controversial proposal is to welcome trade with the Chinese, which she identifies as bringing mutual benefit. The relevance for the study of China's impact in Lao PDR is discussed in more depth below.

Leys offered a first major criticism of development theory (1996a). Writing in 1994, he had a starting point similar to Moyo's, in the low and falling basic indicators in Africa. He too stressed social disintegration as a by-product of development aid and a fuel to corruption. Leys' solutions lay in the construction of a clearer view of what is happening in Africa. He did not completely reject the aid paradigm but

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[20] *Established by Professor Yunnis in Bangladesh*

argued that most of the debt be written off. He suggested that external support be denied '*to kleptocrats and thugs in office'* (p.46), with aid given directly to popular movements for cooperation and reform. Less power should be given to the World Bank and other international financers, he argued, and they should be replaced by collaborative involvement in policy-making and different kinds of long-term aid and trade packages. This perhaps presaged the Paris Declaration, donor cooperation and arguments around local ownership.

Donors use aid as a means to influence the recipient country (see esp. King 2004 and Novelli 2009). Influence can be overt as in the European Union's Country Strategy Paper (2007-2013) which presents a key objective:

> to ensure a key role for the EC in the establishment and implementation of reform in Lao PDR, and will enhance the EC's profile as one of the country's most prominent and influential development partners.

Less overt use of power is described by Novelli (2009) who argues that *'aid follows guns*, describing development aid used as a political tool. Nye (2004:10) makes the case for the use of 'soft power' which he describes as, '*The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than co-ercion or payment'.* A key area of investigation is whether donor strategies can be identified and the ways how power is wielded, through 'hard' or 'soft' means.

The relation to Lao PDR

In this section I relate the critical views of development aid to the study. The starting point for the research was my perception of the relative failure of donor aid to bring about significant change to schooling for many children in Lao PDR. In this circumstance I have naturally reflected on whether there are better ways to do it. However neither the work of the post development theorists nor of Leys and Moyo immediately supports my analysis of the situation of Lao PDR. Firstly, it is important to note that Lao society has not been disintegrated by aid. In fact the strong village and district structures reflect a largely intact society. While the basic indicators of Lao PDR are not high, e.g. life expectancy is 179th in the world, the intact society supports people in times of need. Poverty is rife, but the distance between richest and poorest is still relatively small. The country is currently experiencing economic growth in the region of 6-7% per year. The economy, however, starts from a very low base and improved prosperity has yet to reach rural areas where 80% of people live by agriculture. Neither are there currently popular movements for cooperation and reform.

Phaxayavong (2009) sees the country as aid dependent but characterises the problem as not enough effort having been put into development strategies rather than aid as a destructive force. Undoubtedly there is corruption associated with donor aid to education, as noted in Section 1.2.2 of this document, but training courses take place and manuals are distributed and, in education, aid activities generally reach the field. In this circumstance, in a relatively stable society, with

apparent government support to education reform, there is need to know why so many children do not complete primary school; why so many fail to become functionally literate and, the focus of the study, what part the present actions of government and donors play in creating education development or lack of development. It must be acknowledged that aid to education and its effects lie in larger circles of change, stagnation and influence, yet this study cannot look at the whole development aid to Lao PDR. The questions I am asking are then not about whether development aid is ultimately a force for good, but how that force currently impacts in one specific area and what more can be done to improve the schooling of this generation of children. In the study I reflect critically on the practice of education reform, while refusing to endorse current post-modern dismissal of development discourses. My knowledge of Lao schools suggests that change is needed. My concern is by whom and how it can be made effective.

China as a development partner

While the focus is aid to education, the overall changing nature of development aid provides a context to the study, in particular the changing role of the large and influential neighbour, China. The disbursements of new donors, called here '*non-DAC donors'* (Woods 2008) were already around US$8.5 billion worldwide in 2006. China is by far the largest non-DAC donor, combining a series of loans and credits as well as direct investment, as in rubber and oil palm plantations, in Lao PDR. As mentioned in Chapter One of this study, China's direct aid to education is largely in terms of scholarships to Chinese institutions. China does not take part

in the donor meetings or ESWG meetings. However, its actions do in fact impact on education and the economy more generally and as such is becoming an important force in Lao PDR. The extent and exact workings are hard to assess, as sources of public information are limited. The information then tends to come through gossip and I find checking its accuracy difficult. However I have some personal knowledge to bring. I was asked to evaluate an education project in four districts of a rural province. The province has five districts so I asked why not the fifth. I was told this is the "Chinese District'. The whole district has been leased to the Chinese Government for 50 years, and the Chinese were farming oil palm and rubber trees. The schools were now under Chinese authority. I understood this had been applied to two districts in the country. In a state in which traditional land rights are not legally formalised, many people lost the right to farm the land they had traditionally occupied. I also understand that the process of leasing districts has stopped but it should be noted, as I remarked in Chapter One, that Chinese aid is welcomed by government because it comes without strings. Roads and bridges are built and Chinese technicians are to be found in rural areas giving advice on rice growing or forest cultivation without pressure for greater democracy or change. Huang and Ren (2012) describe China's approach to aid which sums up its approach to aid in Lao PDR:

> It relies on aid principles that diverge in many ways from those of traditional Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor countries, particularly in relation to non-interference, mutual benefit and non-conditionality. China's foreign aid also relies on a mixing of economic cooperation, trade and investment deals.

Lancaster (2007) records the anxiety felt by donors at China's interventions but also records moves towards greater planning and evaluation of aid by the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the opening discussion with the traditional DAC donors.

Moyo (2009) makes a strong case for regarding the Chinese presence in Africa as a positive measure. She sees the exchange of raw materials for skills and as a normal process of trade. She however expresses a minority point of view and undoubtedly in Lao PDR and a number of other countries Chinese influence creates anxieties for western donors. Worries articulated to me in informal conversation by donor officials in Lao PDR were located around lack of attention to human rights; good governance and environmental standards. There is also a less clearly articulated but nevertheless powerful fear that DAC donors will lose their current authority and ability to set the direction of aid.

The above discussion indicates two areas of investigation for the study. The first is the Lao perception of western donors. I expect to identify a preference for support from Asian neighbours, to whom Lao citizens feel culturally closer. A further area of interest is whether the study will challenge my current position on development aid. The answer will depend partly on what sort of aid is dispensed in education – whether assistance is largely to physical construction of schools and materials or whether more ideological questions of pedagogy or school management which aim to change culture predominate. The investigation is surrounded by the question of whether aid can be given without creating

dependency.

3.3.3 Studies of the dynamics of education reform

The study aims to investigate the ways donor aid to education reform is accepted and addressed in the differing contexts of Lao PDR. In this section I review some studies which also seek to describe the dynamics of participation in reform agendas. I looked in particular at the work of Mosse (2005, with Lewis, 2006), who pays attention to the actions of development workers in Africa and has been closely concerned to understand how NGO field workers interpret policy into action. He concludes that the actions of development workers are shaped by the exigencies of their organisations and the need to maintain relationships rather than by policy. With Lewis (2006.8) he argues that current development policy continues to be characterised by a striking incongruence, between, on the one hand, what Cornwall and Brock (2005) describe as *'a seductive mix'* of development *'buzzwords'* such as '*poverty reduction', 'empowerment' 'partnership' and 'civil society*' and, on the other hand, by a striking lack of progress in relation to a wide range of development indicators. This is congruent with the starting point of this study. Mosse's way forward, as is mine, is to know more of *'development's routines, practices and subjectivities'* (Biershenck et al, 2002). An important insight for this study brought by Mosse (2005) is the current emphasis amongst donors on getting policy right. Mosse argues that donors are struggling to find or create a universal model of good policy. A question to be asked in this study is whether donors work towards 'right' policies and practices or

take a flexible, contextualised approach.

Bierschenck (1988) based on insights gained from his work in Benin, confirms the starting point of the study that development aid must be understood as impacting differentially on differing individuals and groups and that simple input to output models of development aid do not allow for this complexity. He constructs development as:

> an arena of negotiation for all groups involved. They act according to their own interests, using very different frames of reference, for social interaction, rationalisation of action and cultural views of the world (p.146).

A further example of a study which seeks to understand the dynamics of participation in reform agendas is that of Caddell (2005) who from her multi-layered ethnographic research into the work of Basic and Primary Education Programme, investigated local responses to decentralised educational planning in Nepal, in the context of EFA reporting. She argues (p.456) that educational reform is undertaken in the expectation of 'a *perceived shared vision of educational reform'*. This unrealistic expectation creates an area of potential disjuncture between this apparent shared vision and '*listening to the local'*. In particular she challenges the current practice of setting targets, arguing that it limits the ability of policy makers and practitioners to understand and engage with the diverse array of issues which impact on the pace and direction of educational change.

She has argued that understanding the everyday dynamics of partnerships and participation in reform agendas requires a more politicised analysis, with greater

attention to understanding inequalities in relationships and decision-making. Non-achievement of goals cannot only be ascribed to failure of educational administrations or a lack of capacity or financial resources. Rather, the meanings and interpretations attached to reform agendas must be considered and attention paid to specific contextual factors and concerns. Caddell, talking in particular of the Nepal EFA initiative, argues that the development of a more grounded view is needed with greater understanding of existing patterns of communication.

Her work provides a number of insights which support this study. This study is concerned to unpick the ways the reform activities are interpreted at varying levels of implementation and the ways this interpretation impacts on the practical outcomes. Whether donor-supported education reform in Lao PDR takes note of existing patterns of communication and takes into account its interpretation at varying levels of implementation is the concern of this study in relation to the broader networks of influence, power and inequality.

Another study which has developed the thinking of this research is that of Teamey (2005). In a study in which she viewed snapshots of social practices within select contexts and people concerned with education reform in Pakistan, she investigated the ways in which the Millennium Development Goals had been translated and mediated across different development organisations. She looked at the ways in which these organizations (global, national and local) have interpreted policies and conceptualized education and development. Of particular interest to this study is her relation of the global and national notions, which she

constructed as 'idealised', to local practices. In her research she identified gaps between these idealised conceptualisations and local social practices and understandings. She also discussed how social science methods of policy and discourse analysis can be used to study and understand better the ways these idealised policies are translated into what is being practiced, and the ways the gaps impact on the implementation of reform. Her work confirms the validity of a central contention at the start of the study, that there is likely to be mismatch between central and local constructions of children, education and schooling. Her work draws attention to the need for this study to investigate existing thinking and practices at varying levels and contexts of the education sector in Lao PDR and to work to identify the ways the new practices instigated by the education reform are interpreted and incorporated into the education practice which is implemented in rural schools.

3.3.4 Technical assistance (TA)

In Lao PDR a high level of reliance is placed on external technical assistance as a facilitating mechanism for education reform in Lao PDR and my own experience of offering technical assistance to educational development predisposes me to explore the opinions and expectations of technical assistance. A number of studies (e.g. OECD study [2004] quoted by Riddell (2008:202) have focussed on the level of impact of technical assistance. Riddell (p.203) suggests that, while there is little aggregate evidence of the impact of external technical assistance, there is a growing consensus, not least amongst many leading official donors, that

TA, as traditionally given, has largely been a failure. However, the provision of TA remains a major element of external support. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2012) sees TA as '*a vital element of (its) development strategy*'[21] and the International Monetary Fund states on its web site (Mar 2012) that '*Technical assistance is one of the benefits of IMF membership*'[22]. In this way technical assistance, largely through provision of technical experts, is still a vital and valued part of the development aid of some donor agencies.

Leach (1996) in her review of external technical assistance to a project in Sudan, found a number of perception gaps between expatriates providing technical assistance and the Sudanese implementers of public sector projects in Northern Sudan. Her conclusions may help to focus the exploration related to research question three, which relates to the transfer of the new knowledge/skills/information. She found that expatriate technical assistant consultants and national implementers held ethnocentric views of their input, coloured by their own cultural and institutional environments (p.181). In effect they did not share a view of project reality with local implementers. This she concluded was likely to have adverse effects on implementation. This study will explore just what those effects, adverse or otherwise, may be. Another important finding for this study is her observation that*, 'objectives, strategies and performance criteria are largely the product of western culture (p.181).'* Leach wrote her study in 1996, before the major review of donor policy to development aid, brought together in

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[21] http://www2.adb.org/ta/default.asp

[22] http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/tech.htm

the Paris Declaration (2005). The questions raised for the study are whether the perception gaps have been closed and whether the dominance of western views has been lessened.

3.3.5 Knowledge selection and transfer

As noted above research question three explores the origin and transmission of knowledge. The relationship between existing and new knowledge is as an area of reflection and questions are raised for the study about where it originates, the ideological perspectives underlying selection and the methods of transmission. The study draws in particular on two bodies of literature. One is concerned with teaching and learning, and how people are offered and receive information. I draw on theories of teaching and /learning that are based on the work of educational thinkers listed in Chapter Three of this document who relate to a tradition broadly referred to as student-She world, to the internationalisation of education knowledge, and in particular the movement of educational ideas, institutions or practices across international borders (Cowen 2002). I draw in particular on the work of Beech (2006), Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008) and Rappleye (2006).

3.3.6 Policy

At the early stages of the study I looked particularly at the literature of policy development, especially to the work of Scott (2000), Ozga, (2000) and Ball (2006). However, in practice, the focus of the study turned from policy analysis or

evaluation to the ways policy becomes practice. This lessened the need to explore how policy comes about and places emphasis on respondents' perceptions of policy decisions. However the views of policy theorists have given insights into the ways education policy is designed to bring about change and the slips between policy and practice even in developed countries.

Mosse (2005) has written on policy in development aid, arguing that currently development agencies have become over preoccupied with policy, to the detriment of practice. Although his focus is on the policy of development aid agencies, he expresses a concern underpinning a strand of the argument in this thesis, the disjunction between policy and practice and for this reason I quote the following from his book (p.1):

> Despite the enormous energy devoted to generating the right policy models, strangely little attention is given to the relationship between these models of practice and events that they are expected to generate or legitimise in particular contexts. At best the relationship between policy and practice is understood in terms of an unintended 'gap' between theory and practice, reduced by better policy more effectively implemented.

Through this study I hope to gain new insight into the relationship between policy and practice in one instance of donor aided education reform.

3.4   Conclusion to the chapter

In the first three chapters I have set the scene for the study by looking the contexts, actual and theoretical that ground the study. The chapter reinforces the importance paid to context in this study, something that will be returned to time and time again. The chapters record the starting points of the study. In an ethnographic study, issues are raised through the study process, and the work of further theorists and supportive literature will be drawn on and recorded as issues arise.

This chapter has been particularly concerned with the ways theorists can provide conceptual tools for the investigation of donor-supported education reform. Each of the following chapters includes discussion of the ways these theoretical constructs are turned into practical tools for analysis of study data. In the next chapter the lens of exploration is placed on the forum in which donors and MoE officials join in public discussion of education policy, the ESWG.

CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLIC DISCOURSE: EDUCATION SECTOR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

4.0   Overview of the chapter

In this chapter I begin to explore the discourses of donor aid to education reform and start by reflecting on the public forum for donor/GoL dialogue, the Education Sector Working Group (EWSG). The focus of this chapter is the public discussion of education policy, the differing positioning of agencies and individuals within the public policy discourse and the onward impact of this public statement of GoL/donor cooperation.

In the introduction to the study I described a research approach reliant on the analysis of differing, selected discourses that go to make up the overall discourse of education reform. I selected the ESWG for examination as it is seen by both donor representatives and officials of MoE as representing a new style of dialogue over education reform. I was able to observe two meetings, some eighteen months apart.

In the chapter I give background information about the origins and aims of the ESWG and go on to record my observations and reflections on the meetings. I reflect on the discourse of the meetings, the positioning of participants and power

structures in operation. I analyse the meetings drawing on aspects of Habermas's theory of communicative action, in particular his theory of ethical discourse. The chapter goes on to set these meetings in a wider context, reviewing the implementers' perceptions of policy in practice and closes by bringing together the chapter's findings.

The position of the researcher

Before analysing the meetings, I consider the position of the researcher in relation to the meeting. In the context of a government/donor meeting I am an outsider and observer. However, observation was informed by knowledge of education in Lao PDR and of Lao meetings. My professional and friendship relations with some participants allowed discussion of aspects of the meeting with them, something which led to greater understanding of what was happening.

4.1   Investigation of two ESWG meetings

In order to set the meetings in context I start by giving some background information.

4.1.1 Background information on ESWG

Instituted in 2007 after the signing of the Vientiane Declaration, the group is given considerable status by both MoE officials and the donor community. To illustrate

the value given by donors, I quote from an official of a United Nations organisation who told me in interview in English that the donors regard the establishment of the ESWG as *'their greatest achievement in developing relationships between donor and government'*. Value by the Ministry was illustrated by a high level MOE official, who told me in interview in English, '*Now we talk to the donors face to face'* and *'donors have been very good in helping us to develop policy'*.

A Donor Working Group was established in 2003, in response to a changing approach to development aid, epitomised by OECD paper *Harmonizing Donor Practices for Effective Aid Delivery (2003)*. The terms of reference for the newly formed group indicated its main purpose as '*for donors to ensure appropriate coordination amongst themselves'*. An overarching principle was expressed as, *'the groups are strongly encouraged to invite Government representatives to attend meetings to provide information and participate is substantive decisions*'. In 2007, in response to the Paris Declaration (2005) and subsequent Vientiane Declaration (2007) the Donor Working Group was transformed to the Education Sector Working Group, a major change because it became, at least nominally, run by MoE with members from both GoL and donor agencies.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the ESWG, finalised in Oct 2007, give the following objectives:

1. Provide a mechanism for government and development partners to engage in joint planning and prioritization, resulting in the production of an annual jointly agreed, prioritized and costed sector plan, aligned with GoL planning and budget cycles.

2. Mobilize and encourage the efficient use of combined GoL and external resources and increase the transparency and predictability of Development Partner (DP) assistance within the sector.

3. Promote the development of the Education Sector, with attention to gender equity, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals within key policy frameworks;

4. Establish linkages, facilitate coordination and promote dialogue and discussion on key sectoral issues between GoL through MoE and DPs.

Attention is drawn to the first objective which gives DPs and GoL equal roles in decision making, presumably for the whole of the education sector. Objectives two to four use unspecific verbs, which include '*encourage', 'promote', 'establish linkage'* and '*facilitate*'. These objectives give donor agencies a facilitative role but Objective One allows DPs to '*engage in joint planning'* of an '*annual jointly agreed prioritized and costed sector plan'*. This describes an equal role with GoL in education policy making and education planning. I do not regard this as desirable and in fact it contradicts two basic tenets of the Paris Declaration referring to ownership and the role of the donor agency:

> **Ownership** - *Developing countries set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions and tackle corruption.*

> **Alignment** - *Donor countries align behind these objectives and use local*

systems[23].

Although the first objective does use the word 'align' to discuss the relationship between the donor agencies and GoL, if only in planning and budget cycles, the above reinforces my perception that the donor agency/GoL relationship is not yet clearly defined or developed in Lao PDR.

The meetings

The ESWG has two levels of meetings, executive and technical meetings. The executive meeting takes place six monthly and the technical meeting three monthly. The executive meeting is co-chaired by Minister of Education, the Australian Ambassador and a Unicef representative and is attended by heads of Ministry sections and high level representatives of development partners. The technical level meetings are co-chaired by Director General of Department of Planning and Cooperation, an AusAid and a Unicef representative. Technical staff of MoE is invited as well as representatives of development partners.

I contrast the concerns of the different level meetings, quoting from recent agenda items. The main agenda items of the executive meeting of June 2011 were the endorsement of the revised Five-Year Education Sector Development Plan

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[23] http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0%2C2340%2Cen_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1%2C00.html down loaded from the Development Cooperation–Directorate's website on 21/02/2011

(ESDP) 2011-15 and the endorsement of the annual sector monitoring process. The technical meeting of May 2010 focussed on implementation updates and offered reports on:

- Basic Education Development Program (BEDP) Review Mission;

- Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP) Mission;

- Implementation of the Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan (TESAP);

- Capacity Building for EFA;

- Technical and Vocational Education and Training Programme (TVET); and

- EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund Program.

The divide is roughly policy and practice, though the divide is not sharp and the meetings I attended were both named as technical meetings and covered both policy and practice. Minutes of meetings are taken and circulated to all ESWG members for agreement before their adoption.

4.1.2 The ESWG meeting of 2008

My first observation of the ESWG was in 2008, while the group was relatively new. The importance given to this technical meeting was demonstrated by being chaired by a Vice Minister of Education, with two Directors of MoE and a donor representative sitting at the high table. They all delivered opening speeches in order of status. The Lao speakers used a register of the Lao language specific to high level public occasions, which uses highly honorific pronouns to refer to

participants and a selected vocabulary. Control of this register is a status marker in Lao PDR, both of the presenter and the meeting. The donor representative spoke in English. The high table was decorated with flowers, each person with a bottle of water and microphone. The table was placed facing the rest of the participants, who were ranked on rows of chairs facing the front. The meeting took place in the most prestigious hotel in town, in its large meeting room. The above, in particular the presence of the Vice Minister, are further markers of the high status accorded to the meeting. The cost of lunch, drinks and snacks, the rent of the room, per diem for participants, with the commitment of government and donor officials' working time, indicate the considerable resources allocated to the meeting.

In many ways, the meeting appeared to be a built on a tradition of Lao style of government meetings. The format is widely recognised as government meetings are shown regularly on Lao Television and the format is used in meetings at all levels of government. However, I suggest the makeup of top table is a visual metaphor for a desired relationship between MoE and donors which indicates donor close involvement but establishes MoE as taking the lead. This is somewhat at odds with the relationship sketched by the first objective of the group's terms of reference.

The meeting is hosted by the MoE which sends out invitations. There were eighty nine participants made up of senior MoE staff; MoE key technical staff; key experts from other Ministries; officials of provincial education services and other

education officials from Teacher Training Colleges and Schools, National University of Lao (NUOL), and National Institute for Research in Education, with representatives of a development bank. Bilateral and UN agencies and the members of the TA team working on the development of the ESDF were also there. Notably absent were INGO representatives.

The meeting had one agenda item, the presentation and review of the draft five year ESDF, which refers to schooling. The work towards the ESDF was supported a bilateral donor, who financed a team of four international technical assistants (TA) and seven national TA consultants. The morning session was taken up by presentations by the four international TAs, who spoke in English with simultaneous translation into Lao. The main points were projected onto two screens, one in Lao and the other in English. The actual presentation deviated somewhat from the published programme, which gave only 30 minutes for TA presentation, the rest of the time to be given to presentation by four MoE officials. As it was, four members of the international TA team presented for a total of two and a half hours, the major part of the morning. MoE staff presentation time was not used. No explanation of the change was made and I surmise that MoE was less concerned to demonstrate, publically, their ownership of ESDF, than was the donor community. None of the Lao TA consultants presented, indicating a hierarchical relationship amongst the TA team, with Lao expertise given less status than that of external consultants.

The afternoon session was taken up with group discussion. At lunchtime, tables

had been brought in and formed into six groups. I felt that the groups would be large but many participants had left, leaving groups of between five and ten. Participants were directed into groups each with a discussion topic related to the ESDF. The donors formed one group, with discussion in English and I joined this one. No discussion started and I raised a query about the document, pointing to the risk column of the policy matrix, which identifies MoE's lack of cooperation as a risk. The group leader, an official of a UN organisation, firmly prevented any discussion. '*We're not discussing it now'*, I was told. At the time I did not know why. Only three donor representatives, all Lao, stayed for the afternoon session. '*Busyness'* and '*pressure of work'* were given as reasons for donor officials leaving and the group sat around rather aimlessly. I used the time to observe the interaction in other groups. As is common in Lao, the discussion was dominated by the higher status officials in each group.

After presentations of group findings the meeting was closed with speeches from a Lao MoE Director and the donor official, both of whom had returned for the closing ceremony. The Vice Minister did not return. The full complement of donor representatives had returned for the meeting's closure. Noticeable was a high level of tension among non Lao representatives of donor agencies. The leader of the informal donor education group called other donors individually or in small groups for private discussion. I read this as that something important had happened that was not to be shared with the main meeting. With hindsight I understood that this was associated with the non-acceptance of the document, which was made public later. Possibly a message of non acceptance had been

sent by GoL. The meeting's closure followed a traditional format, concluding with remarks congratulating the TA team on its work and praising the process of consultation, by the MoE Director and a representative of a donor agency.

I was told, later, by an international official of a donor agency in friendly conversation that, before the meeting, much work had been done behind the scenes. The informal donor group had thoroughly discussed the document and agreed a joint stance and this was the reason for preventing further discussion. The fact of non-agreement to ESDF was a surprise. I asked various contacts on what grounds it was rejected and whose decision it was, but could find no firm information. I found that selected donor officials had been called to the MoE for pre-discussion. I can only presume that authorities higher them MoE had rejected it.

During the afternoon break I had brief discussion, in Lao, with provincial officials, who were previously known to me. They are not normally invited to the group. I had been told by a Lao official of a bilateral donor agency that the donors had made a point of asking for their inclusion because '*they should know about the new framework,* because *'they will bear the brunt of implementing it'*. Provincial officials, in friendly discussion, told me they had had last minute invitations and came to the meeting without background information. They grumbled at being taken away from their work at short notice. One told me in Lao, '*They don't understand our work in the Provinces. If they call us we have to drop what we are doing and come. They think we don't do anything'*. This was an articulation of a

gap between the centre and the provinces/field that I noted a number of times during data collection.

International Non Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are invited to send representatives to the informal donor group, but none was invited to this ESWG. The manager of an INGO commented, in interview in English on another occasion, that INGOs are not '*seen as donors*'. He told me '*you know the INGOs together spend some United States Dollars (USD) $8,000,000 a year in Lao, and we know what happens on the ground, but our contribution is not recognised'.* The attitude may reflect GoL's suspicion of INGOs and of their motivation, a view which, I understand, goes back to suspicion of INGO's harbouring Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents in the years after the revolution.

Donor officials, before it became known that the document had been rejected, agreed amongst themselves that the ESWG was a success. Markers of success included, '*the number of participants who attended*'; '*the length of time the senior officials stayed*' and '*the high level of engagement of provincial reps'*. A Lao donor bank official identified the main marker of success as *'putting people round the table to talk'* which is '*a bit of an achievement'*. Donors' criteria for success were therefore, not the quality of discussion or decisions made, but the fact that it took place and government participants engaged with it.

A representative of a bilateral donor, performing the closing speech, told the meeting, *'now donors have to go back and discuss with their head offices'*,

indicating that neither donor agencies in the country nor MoE see themselves as decision making bodies. Decisions are finalised elsewhere.

A tender for the recruitment of a new team with technical expertise was floated, and new consultants brought in to refine the document and complete the process.

A number of factors, the work done behind the scenes; the meeting's lack of decision making powers, and the attention to prevention of public disagreement caused me to reflect on the significance of the meeting and the part it plays in the discourse of education reform, something discussed below.

4.1.3 The ESWG of 2009

The second meeting I attended was some eighteen months later. There were significant differences. The venue had changed. It was held in the conference room of the large Government owned hotel. Participants sat behind tables laid out in rows, facing the high table, which was on a dais, but only held a plain table with a chair for the one host and a lectern for speakers. INGO representatives now attended and, I was told, were regular invitees. The number of attendees was similar, though provincial officials were not included. The range of government agencies represented was the same, but with more MoE officials of lower rank, including deputy directors and those in lower positions attended, some eighty people in all. The meeting was hosted by a Director of the Ministry no donor representative sat at the high table. I saw this as the normal implementation of a

technical meeting.

The agenda consisted of four presentations by Lao Ministry officials, suggesting a move towards greater GoL ownership. I noted the greatly increased use of the English language. The introductory speech by the MoE director was in English and his delivery used a register of development. I noted down several phrases he used, such as '*harmonisation of donors and Lao members'*. I particularly noted '*movement towards human rights*' and the *'responsibility of civil society and managing for results*'. The references to human rights and civil society were surprising, in a context in which the discussion of human rights is normally suppressed and civil society organisations disallowed. I note that in Sept 2010 Lao PDR ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but the 2010 *Amnesty International Report*[24] reports that, *'The government strictly controlled public debate in the media and on the internet*'. It may be that the references to human rights and civil society are indicators towards a more liberal future, but this was not realised during the time of the study. I later consulted a friend, who is a Lao official of a bilateral donor, who has demonstrated on a number of occasions a keen ability to interpret changes to GoL policy. I questioned him on the significance of mention of human rights and inclusion of civil society and he told me, in English. The following is my recollection of what he said, noted down soon after:

> Not yet, not yet. We are not moving to human rights yet. Donors all want
> democracy, human rights so maybe they want to hear. We know that but you can't

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[24] Down loaded from http://thereport.amnesty.org/sites/default/files/AIR2010_AZ_EN.pdf#page=150 on 22/20/2011

talk about democracy in Lao - you can talk about participation. If you look at the documentation we talk about widening participation, not democracy or human rights. Child rights is OK.

I am left with an ambiguity which I am not able to explain. Presentations were made by Lao MoE officials, three of the four in English, only one in Lao. Simultaneous translation was provided. The greater use of English suggests a number of things to me: much greater confidence by higher level Ministry officials in their command of English; the desire to locate themselves in an international discourse of educational reform; and the gaining of symbolic capital by display of competence in English.

Discussion from the floor was invited, but the presentations provoked almost no questioning or comments from participants. The few comments from the floor were from representatives of donor agencies. I looked around at participants and found that most participants were writing carefully in notebooks. I assume they construed the meeting as an information sharing event, a common form of government meeting and they were recording the information given. In contexts in which they feel insecure, I saw actors a number of times, reverting to known behaviours.

In the meeting, I sat next to a deputy director of MoE whom I have known as a colleague for some time. A presentation laying out the next year's education objectives had plainly failed to include sufficient attention to teacher training, my

colleague's area of work. My neighbour and I discussed the deficit quietly, '*Tell them*', she said, *'Go on, you say something. You should tell them*.' I explained that as a visitor and observer I had no right to intervene, but she kept prompting me. I, of course, said it was her role, but she refused and the relevant point was not aired. I reflect below on her reluctance to speak up and well as the general reluctance of attendees to participate.

After the meeting I discussed the general lack of contribution with some other ESWG participants previously known to me and I was told, in English, '*Well you see, they set it up the European way; send out papers two days in advance. The Lao officials should read them but they don't, so they can't join in*'. The comment was made in a joking manner. As an afterthought another Lao MoE official told me, '*Well they are afraid to sound ignorant.*' Further questioning revealed the papers are sent out in English, presenting another hurdle to many meeting participants.

I reflected on what I was told. I interpret the joking manner as an indication that my informants were uncomfortable to criticise their fellows as any public criticism is frowned upon in Lao society. The model was seen as a '*foreign one'* and some participants felt excluded by both the model and its language of delivery. The ESWG has created a new discourse requiring new means of interacting. The ways of working have not yet been internalised or adopted by a large proportion of the participants. The fear of appearing, or being made to feel, foolish in the face of new practices, with the possibility of losing face also noted in other places in the

study. While '*face*' is of particular importance in Lao PDR, I note the significance of self-esteem for all people and the need to safeguard it in times of extensive and rapid change.

In next section I describe the process of constructing a system of analysis.

4.2　A framework for analysis

Since this is a move towards a public discourse I looked though a critical lens, and started by basing analysis on Habermas's (1990) views on communicative action, in particular his criteria for an ethical theory of communication in the public sphere. The rationale for the approach is expressed by Thomassen (2010:84):

> His discourse ethics can be said to be a part of a Critical Theory of society in that it provides a way of approaching practical questions and that it involves a reflexive attitude and yardstick of critique, namely rationale discourse and consensus.

The brief statement offers an approach to the evaluation of ESWG as public discourse and to central themes of the study, the relationship between discourse and practical application and emancipation.

I saw powerful social and cultural factors played out in the ESWG meetings. They include:

- a hierarchical, social and political context which closely prescribes roles;

- a cultural unwillingness to risk public contribution. This has a gender dimension as even a high status woman was unwilling to contribute; and

- the perception of a 'foreign' work pattern which does not match the work experience of many of the participants.

The table gives a brief summary of the tenets of ethical discourse matched against these realities of the discourse of ESWG. The tenets of ethical discourse are taken from Habermas (1990:86).

Table Six: The tenets of ethical discourse matched to the discourse of ESWG

Ethical discourse	Discourse of the ESWG
(1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.	• Hierarchical and cultural factors effectively restricting participation of most, especially women and lower level officials
(2) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.	• Poor preparation of participants and information channels and cultural and hierarchical factors make many participants unable to question even obviously challengeable assertions
(3) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.	• As above informational, culture and hierarchical factors preventing open expression
(4) Everyone is allowed to express his[25] attitudes, desires and needs.	• As above informational, culture and hierarchical factors preventing open expression
(5) No speaker may be	• There are strong factors derived from social

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[25] The male pronoun is used in the original.

prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)	and political contexts that effectively prevent the exercise of rights as defined by Habermas.

Thomassen (2010:88) argues that critiques of ethical discourse are therefore critiques of the theory of communicative action itself. Here I look more closely at two critiques of TCA and how they illuminate the implementation of ESWG. A well known critique is put forward by Lyotard (1984) who argues that TCA's focus on reaching consensus is based in a foundational perception of what makes a good person and what makes a good society. Moreover, reaching consensus runs the risk of the adoption of standardised norms, which can, in turn, be imposed on those not a part of mainstream society. In the case of the ESWG, I see the attempt to implement a standardised norm, based in an international view of public donor/MoE discourse, which gives all participants the right to contribute, but presented in traditional Lao meeting format. The outcome is that officials lower in the hierarchy are doubly disadvantaged, by both the foreignness of the procedures and their traditionally passive role in meetings.

Gilligan (1982) sees Habermas' theories as gender biased, because they do not take into account differences in men's and women's approaches to thinking and morality. The critique may be extended to differences in approach between members of differing cultural and social groups and in the ESWG little attention is paid to the ways attendees construct their role in the meeting, with little support to participation by lower level officials.

The above critiques are both based in a view that speech and actions are situated in social and personal contexts and, by implication, an ideal vision cannot be fully separated from those contexts. When I attempted to evaluate the processes of ESWG against Habermas's idealised, de-contextualised model, the ESWG appeared almost entirely dysfunctional, something that could lead the researcher to overlook the reality of what is happening and the functions the meetings are achieving. I go on to reflect on the meetings and to identify some functions they fulfil.

4.2.1   Historical and current contexts impacting on implementation of ESWG

The ESWG is a new form of discourse to Lao PDR, brought about by donor action to improve dialogue between GoL and donor agencies. The format of ESWG itself one which has been adopted in other countries including Cambodia and Indonesia, and therefore draws on an international model rather than one designed for Lao PDR. It has a number of characteristics of a '*foreign*' meeting. Since the revolution of 1975, meetings air issues and inform those who make decisions, rather than make or ratify decisions themselves. When I worked first in Lao PDR I did not understand how meetings worked. After meetings, I would ask colleagues, '*what have we decided?*' It was pointed out gently to me that decisions are made at policy level, by '*people more important than us'*. Meetings are informative and advisory, rather than decision making. A decision as important as the adoption of a five year education reform programme in the ESWG is made

at higher levels than the MoE, and the ESDF document was rewritten in the few months after its rejection but not finally endorsed until 2009. The delay in endorsement may be seen as an assertion of Lao control.

From the first ESWG meeting I learned that the donors thrashed out the issues in the informal donor education group, thus came to the meeting with an agreed position. Behind the scenes discussion between donor representatives and MoE officials avoids public conflict. Public conflict is wholly unacceptable in Lao culture and public disagreement disallowed at any level. Organisations new to Lao PDR and the occasional TA may try to air differences in public meetings, but most organisations work within the Lao cultural norms. In my last visit to Vientiane before submitting this thesis (June 2010) I was told with some excitement by a Lao friend working for a bilateral donor agency that one of the major donors had stepped outside the norms of engagement and made a public complaint about the Government land usage. I know that injustices in the area have been a concern of the donor agency for some time but do not know of the outcome of the change of tactic. I record the incident to show that the procedure was so unusual that it was eagerly shared and remarked upon.

I considered who is invited to the ESWG and who attends. The meetings are hosted by MoE. Expenses are paid by donors and an official of a United Nations organisation who liaises with MoE over the ESWG told me, '*we try to get them to get the letters out and plan the agenda, but it's only one person in the Ministry, so we have to support with logistical stuff*.' Capacity and incapacity is a theme of the

study. I note that 'incapacity' here is simply a lack of people to do the job. The MoE is responsible for issuing invitations and my own request to attend the ESWG meeting to a government official was met with a simple unconditional *'yes'* with no restrictions, whereas an international donor representative at the 2008 meeting became anxious about confidentiality and asked me not use documentation associated with the meeting. Of course I said I would not quote them and I was told, *'No, that's not enough, burn them'.* I reflected on the need for secrecy she was expressing. The incident indicated both that the donor official felt considerable ownership of the proceedings and that the official felt concern for unofficial dissemination of information. The reason for the anxiety is still not clear to me, in particular in the context of the relaxed government attitude. It is just one example of the many ambiguities I met while undertaking the study: an inversion of the conventionally understood state of affairs, where the government routinely restricts information and donors push for greater transparency.

4.2.2 Hidden functions of ESWG

The meetings ostensibly provide a mechanism for government and development partners to engage in joint planning and prioritisation, although in practice the ESWG meeting provides an advisory forum rather than a decision making one. The ESWG fulfils a number of functions within the discourse of donor aided education reform in Lao PDR which are discussed below. Three particular purposes are detailed: symbolic communication; bridging between old and new and the register of development.

Communication events and functions of ESWG: symbolic communication

While the meeting discourse is found wanting if measured against the ideal, it symbolises an effective and productive relationship between donor agency and government. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, its value is spoken of in very positive terms by representatives of both donor agencies and MoE and as a symbolic event it gains power from the significance ascribed to it by donors and government. The ESWG plays a part in increased the status and visibility of the reforms to education, within the MoE and other government offices and, more widely, by occasional Lao television and radio broadcasts and newspaper articles. Undoubtedly education has achieved a greater prominence in the last years and the EWSG demonstrates a new significance given to education by GoL. Because of this it both creates and communicates a view of the importance of the reforms to education.

Communication events and functions of ESWG: a bridging function

The ESWG is located in the bisection of Lao tradition and an assumptive future. I suggest that education reform, as described in, the ESDF, if fully implemented, will bring far reaching changes to Lao society. In this situation the ESWG provides one tool amongst many facilitating the transition from one state to another. Developments in education seldom require a fresh start with the complete deconstruction of existing systems but they build on and adapt what is already there. The actions of ESWG may be seen as a symbolic mechanism bridging the

old and the new.

The Government of Lao (GoL) has endorsed reform of the education system but it is concerned to locate changed practice in education within existing systems and ideologies, something demonstrated by the Prime Minister's opening speech to educational administrators' annual meeting in Paxse Province (GoL 2005). The speech was recommended to me by an international consultant who saw it as the first public statement of the Government's intention to prioritise education development. I quote from the speech at some length as it helps to understand the Lao Government's position. The Prime Minister makes a general introduction, followed by congratulations for past successes. He then raises a number of issues, the first of which is quoted below. The typography is as in the version of the speech published in English.

> **Issue 1** I would like all of you to study and grasp the policies of the Party on national development and human resource development of our country. The national development has to be firmly in line with the human resource development and vice versa. Our Party and people have chosen a strongly held socialism goal in the national construction. Therefore, all educational officials and educational administrators have to grasp the essence of the "Eighth Resolutions" of the Party of human resource development which said: Accelerate and enhance the capacity in human resource development aiming at making Lao people be good citizens educated, knowledgeable, skillful, creative, and enthusiastic in the national development as well as self development, good health and high morale in order to respond to the real needs of development. We have to enhance human resource development in accordance with development strategies (socialism goal)

and economic structure as well as the requirements of internationalization. These are important areas the leadership of the Ministry of Education as well as educational administrators of different levels must study and deeply and correctly understand them and put them into concrete practice.

A question raised by the study is whether procedures adopted for the analysis of texts can be used effectively on texts produced by non native speakers of a language or for translated texts. There is more detailed discussion in the next chapter, which comprises the discussion of a programme planning document and in Chapter Seven in which translated texts are analysed. Although the above text contains examples of non standard English, the style is straightforward and I look at the direct messages and declared functions, rather than trying to interpret nuances of word choice or selection of grammatical construction which would provide evidence in text produced by a native speaker/writer.

The meta-narrative of the above passage is the establishment of continuity between the new and the old. The PM acknowledges the need for new things, but locates new things*, 'strategies and economic structure as well as the requirements of internationalization'*, within the '*socialism goal*'. He connects change to past achievement through use of familiar rhetoric. He makes three references to '*the Party*', the '*socialism goal*' is mentioned twice and there is one mention of the '*Eighth Resolution of the party*'. The subtext is that new things are in train but they still form a part of the existing socialist philosophy or ideology. Roles assigned to education officials and administrators are to grasp '*the essence*

of the Eighth Party Resolution' and MoE is assigned the role of putting the policy into concrete practice. The power of the discourse lies in the employment of a familiar rhetoric and the declaration of desirable, if imprecise, outcomes, which include '*human resource development'*, '*socialism goal'* and '*economic structure'*. Eagleton (1991:58) makes a point that '*successful ideology*[26] *can render beliefs natural and self evident – to identify them with the 'common sense' so that nobody can imagine how they might be different'*. The Prime Minister's statement represents the attempt to embed new processes within the understood system to the point that they become invisible and revised education practices take their place in an integral part of existing philosophy, policy and practice. The speech and the EWSG meetings both play a part in this process by introducing new processes within traditional and understood procedures.

Communication events and functions of ESWG: a register of development

The process of acquisition and impact of new knowledge/information/skills is a theme running through the study and I reflect on the impact of the move towards the use of the register of development in English. The register allows Lao officials to take a fuller public part in regional development discourse and that of the wider world. Control of the registers gives symbolic gains and confers symbolic privilege. It is also the product of privilege, that is, those of higher social status gain higher position, have greater opportunity to learn English and to take part in international discourse.

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[26] I echo the interpretation of the word ideology by Fairclough, (2001:2) who sees it as the commonsense assumptions which are implicit in their conventions but of which people are generally not consciously aware.

Like all technical registers the register of international discourse has value as shorthand between people who bring similar understandings and expectations to bear. Observations of ESWG showed that not all have equal access or understanding and the use of the register, in particular in English, excludes many participants. It is fundamental to the view of discourse in this study that those with authority have the power to direct knowledge along certain lines. I reflect on Foucault as interpreted by Said (1983:12):

> If, with Foucault, we have learned to see culture as an institutionalized process by which, what is considered appropriate is to be kept appropriate, we have also seen Foucault demonstrating certain alterities, certain Others, have been kept silent, outside - or domesticated, for use inside the culture.

The existing structures of alterity and domestication remain, that is, the meetings largely reproduce existing authority structures and those who previously had the right to air their voice still have a voice, and those who did not still do not, even though the discourse is apparently set up to be more inclusive.

In the light of the above insights in the next section I look at future direction of ESWG.

4.3   The future development of EWSG

Information from 2011 suggests that the ESWG is well established and taking place regularly. As noted above, it continues to fulfil a number of functions in

relation to education reform. However existing societal power and authority structures are played out and the intention recorded in its terms of reference and minutes of the informal donors' meeting indicate the intention to implement the ESWG as an inclusive, participative activity. As it is, implementation has little impact on existing hierarchical practices and cultural restrictions. In particular factors that discourage contribution from women and lower level officials are not challenged. My experience suggests that meeting planners sometimes believe that the setting of an apparently participatory situation can promote participation, without further attention. In a situation in which public image is of overriding importance and it is often a better choice to say or do nothing rather than risk public disapprobation, a more active approach to encouraging participation is necessary. I also suggest that the capacity for active participation in dialogue is learned and that many participants have little opportunity to learn and exercise the necessary skills.

The criteria for success applied by MoE officials and donor representatives recorded above may prevent a more detailed look at the working of the meetings. A more clearly articulated framework of evaluation based on a more precise articulation of the intended functions and communication events would indicate strategies to create more inclusive and effective meetings.

4.4   Policy into practice

I include discussion of the relationship between policy and practice in this chapter,

as I see the ESWG as a link in a chain of impact from policy development to impact on the final recipient, the rural child. ESWG is largely concerned with policy development. The main thrust of this discussion is, rather than policy development itself, the ways policy is put into practice. Concerns were widely expressed by officials of the central Ministry of the difficulty of getting policy into practice.

Education policy is designed to bring about change and its end product is change in schools. Education is seen essentially as a practical activity and the outcomes must be essentially pragmatic, that is children must learn to read and become numerate, to ensure their human rights and to make governmental investment cost effective. Donor agencies' main effort, in the period of research, has gone into the development of improved dialogue with GoL and the creation of education policy and action plans. The resultant documents are seen to be useful and are unquestioned as guides to action. I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the policies are well received by high MoE officials and their creation is seen as a source of congratulation and self congratulation. The significance attributed to the documents was brought home to me at interview with a high level MoE official. He had the ESDF by his hand, and he quoted from it to underline points he made during our conversation. While the high officials spoke proudly of the achievement of the policies especially the ESWG, other ministry officials in lower positions, the implementers, were explicit in their feeling that the expectations were '*too high'*, as it was expressed by a deputy director in a semi structured interview in English. Respondents from the MoE told me of the difficulties they experienced in getting

policies into practice. I quoted from a lower level official who told me, in translated interview, '*Donors have been very good at supporting our policy and we have good policy documents now*,' but went on to say, '*Our job is to get policy into practice and that is a different matter - very hard*'. A similar point was articulated by a Lao official of a UN agency, who said, '*the policy may be good, but we don't see change for the children*'. A Lao technical assistant (TA) argued that in Lao '*the Ministry does not know what the teachers need*', suggesting a gap in the perceptions of need between Government and those at operational level.

An official of the Ministry quoted in the previous paragraph emphasised the same point when he spoke of new approaches to early childhood education:

> Regarding the policy, it's good, but its implementation is difficult since parents cannot understand early years' development and education, and neither does PES or DEB. I would like to say I see some progress due to the simultaneous development of policy and practice, but many barriers hold back practice, in particular the institutions concerned do not cooperate to get the job done.

The respondent articulates something which came up over and over again in conversation, the relative effectiveness of the policy but the failure of the centre to understand contextual constraints of putting policy into practice. A question raised for the study is whether policy can be '*good*' if it cannot be put into practice. This can be characterised as agency hampered by failure of institutional structures to adapt, something discussed later in the study.

The overall view is of a gap between centre and field, that is, policy is out of touch with practice. From their analysis of the implementation of a project in Africa, in which they took part as international consultants, Moore and Chapman (2003: 567) record a similar situation and a difference in perception of education reform between top and middle level ministry officials. Higher level officials[27] of the MoE are clear that they value the new policies. Officials at deputy director level and those further down the hierarchy who take responsibility for getting policy into practice, identify a gap between centre and field, and between policy and practice.

The point was emphasised by the field director of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) who identified communication from centre to field as a major constraint in bringing about positive change. Communication of new policies and practices is still by document with written instruction for implementation, often with little other explanation. The field director went on to identify a mismatch between policy and practice, saying that many decisions made centrally are not being implemented on the ground and, '*indeed some are not implementable*'. He argued for a more practical approach, for greater focus on things that can be achieved at grass roots level and greater understanding by Ministry officials of the conditions at field level. He saw in particular the government style of issuing directives to district level as a major hurdle. Directives requiring major change are sent out in writing to field implementers, often with no warning and little preparation, an example of which, the implementation of a new

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[27] I identify officials director level and above as high officials, with deputy director and those at lower levels as lower level officials. The division is very broadly, higher officials are concerned with management direction and ceremonial, whereas lower levels are doers, charged with making things happen.

primary curriculum, is included in Chapter Eight. The field director told me that instructions are clearly not well understood and in consequence are poorly implemented. He saw the interpretation of policy into practice as an important contribution of INGO sector but one undervalued by donors in general.

The mismatch of centre to field is a factor in the development of a conventional wisdom which is addressed throughout this study, that is, incapacity of field level officials prevents the achievement of good policies. To illustrate this view, I quote the comments of a Lao representative of a bilateral agency, from interview in English. I present his words as recorded at the time:

> Sometime donors are successful in new policy, drafting new strategy document. To make it happen at lower level you have to drive the process and make it go, because of limited capacity at the lower level.

The impact of donor emphasis on policy making; the gap centre and field and between policy and practice are all factors in a complex relationship between donor support to education and the impact on rural children and are further discussed throughout the study.

4.5   Brief overview and findings of the chapter

The analysis in this chapter allowed me to see ESWG as a social artifact; its institution influenced by the Paris Declaration through the Vientiane Declaration and built on an international model. It has many characteristics of traditional Lao

meetings but carries expectations of changed discourse style. It is given high value by high officials of MoE and donor agencies and demonstrates a donor focus on policy making.

Examination using the tenets of ethical discourse gave a very negative picture of the way the meeting works but a functional communicative approach revealed achievements and role it plays within the reform. However the meetings fell far short of the donor predicted inclusive agenda. I felt the need for greater understanding of the discourses of rhetorical traditions of non western cultures, something considered later in the study.

Ministry implementers indicated a gap between the policies validated by the ESWG and practice in the field. The rationale for poor implementation was often attributed to incapacity on the part of field officials. The view of policy as '*good*' but not implementable is examined throughout the study.

In the next chapter I turn my attention to analysis of a programme planning document, which enables deeper analysis of discourse between GoL and a donor.

CHAPTER FIVE

WRITTEN DISCOURSE: REVIEW OF A DEVELOPMENT BANK SUPPORTED PROJECT PLANNING DOCUMENT

5.0   Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter I examine another discourse of donor aided education reform, a written documentation, in order to explore the meanings it creates and communicates and to identify the place it plays in the dialogue between MoE and a donor agency. I select one project planning document as a focus for analysis. A project planning document is a stage in the process of putting policy into practice and formulates the necessary action. I start the chapter by giving the rationale for the selection of the document and follow this with consideration of the methodology of analysis. I investigate the document's content and go on to look at the writing style and surface features of the text, with the attention the document gives to minority ethnic and gender issues. I pull together research knowledge derived from the use of the framework of analysis and the findings it has produced.

5.1   Background to the analysis of a programme planning document

I start the investigation by recording the reasons for the selection of the document

and the position of the analyst in relation to such documents.

5.1.1 The selection of the document and the position of the analyst

In the course of my work I have been required to read and evaluate the outcomes of many such documents. The document is selected from among other such documents because:

- it epitomises a conventional approach to planning projects which is common and still current in Lao PDR, by means of a technical assistance team from outside the country recruited through the donor's tender procedures;

- it is the planning document for a programme the implementation of which I have followed for three years;

- although the document was written in 2006, the project started in 2008 and expected to continue until 2012, so it is current;

- it is a public document available on a development bank's website.

In 2010, the implementation of the programme planned in this document was delayed by some two years because of '*difficulties in the procurement processes'*. This was told to me by the Lao project manager in friendly conversation in English. The manager also told me that '*it is just beginning to gather momentum'.* Preparation was being made at that time, to extend the project by two years.

The position of the analyst

Before looking in detail at the document I reviewed my position as analyst. My

position as an insider or outsider in relation to the research has been of interest throughout the research. I stand outside this text in that I am not a part of those commissioning, writing or receiving the document. My claim to insideness is my familiarity with such project documentation, and contextual knowledge of the sub-sector of education that it is designed to address.

5.1.2 The origin and purpose of the document

I contextualise the document by giving a brief overview of its origin and purpose. The document is described as a '*Technical Assistance Consultant's Report'* and is entitled '*Lao People's Democratic Republic: For Preparing the Basic Education Development Project.* It is a planning document for a project to develop the lower secondary schooling sub-sector. It gives direction to an expensive and long term project aimed at the reform of an education sub-sector with implementation in eight of seventeen provinces, in 20 poor districts. On the basis of this document an agreement between GoL/MoE was made. The audience is limited. It was sent to the relevant committee of the National Assembly for agreement and continues to be read by high level officials in the MoE and Ministry of Finance (MoF). As a legal agreement between a development bank and the GoL, it has been a constant reference point for the Lao managers for MoE staff to ensure the project is on track. Other audiences include external evaluators and officials of the development bank. It was not translated into Lao. The document is however posted on the bank's website[28] and therefore is freely available. On the basis of

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[28] http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Consultant/32312-LAO/32312-LAO-TACR.pdf

the document and terms of reference, technical assistants (TA) were recruited, and they fleshed out individual areas of intervention.

The document was prepared by a technical assistance team and the makeup of the team, number, names, or nationalities is not revealed. The language is English using a register of project documentation, though with features which suggest is that it is written by fluent but non native speaker/s of English. The compression of ideas into terms not normally used by native British English speakers revealed this. Examples include '*capacitating*' and '*tranching'* and slightly non standard constructions such as '*increased number of LSE[29] graduates of an estimated 23,700 students, will enter USE[30], from beginning to end of the plan period*'.

The document has 305 pages, made up of a knowledge summary, the main document and appendices. The main document has 19 pages, presented under three headings *Performance Indicators and Analysis*, *Analysis of Key Problems and Opportunities* and *The Proposed Basic Education Development Program*. These 19 pages are the focus of the analysis, with some reference to information in the appendices.

The appendices cover both programme planning and contextual issues. They cover the following areas*: Indicative Program Framework; Policy Matrix; BEDP Policy, Program and Project linkages; Development Policy Letter; Education*

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[29] Lower secondary education
[30] Upper secondary education

Sector Review; Lessons; Economic and Financial Analysis; Appendix 8: Summary

Poverty Reduction and Social Strategy (SPRSS); Gender and Ethnic Groups

Development Action Plan; Ethnic Groups Development Plan; Cost Estimates and

Financing Plan; Implementation Schedule; Indicative Procurement Packages;

External Assistance in the Education Sector (Development Coordination Matrix) ;

Outline of Terms of Reference for Consultants; List of Ineligible Items; MOE

Organization Chart; Education Sector Review, External Assistance in the

Education Sector ;Selection Criteria for School Sites and Details of Project Cost

Estimate.

A project planning document wields considerable power both in releasing

resources and in promoting a specific direction to reform activity. This document

directs the use of $USD 12.34 million. In addition, in implementation, it also draws

on the time and energy of MoE personnel, field officials, communities and

teachers.

5.1.3 The methodology developed for document analysis

As the basis of a legally binding agreement between GoL and the supporting

development bank over a monetary grant, it contains what Fairclough (2001:164),

following Habermas, calls a '*strategic discourse'*. It is orientated to strategic goals,

rather than providing a basis for communicative discourse and aims to bring about

specific outcomes rather than acting as a means of promoting discussion and

providing a forum for reaching understanding.

I address the text as a discourse and therefore as socially situated, based in a history of similar documents and with a constructive and dynamic role that both reflects and creates social structures. Analysis of the text is therefore expected to reveal factors which both construct and reflect the relationship between a donor agency and GoL and its influence of the practice of education reform.

5.1.4 Fairclough's procedure for critical analysis of discourse

As the study takes a critical stance, I looked at the model of analysis proposed by Fairclough for critical analysis of text (see especially 2001: Chapters Five and Six). In this section I give a very brief overview of his procedures in order to see how they may be used for the interpretation of the document in question.

He identifies three stages of textual analysis; '*description*', '*interpretation*' and '*explanation*'. I give a brief overview of each below, with comments on its possible use in this chapter.

Description: The focus of the design stage is to explore the formal features of the text, which he defines as Vocabulary, Grammar and Textual structures. Thus in his first stage of analysis the focus is on the meanings derived from the inspection of surface structures. He supplies ten areas of questioning, each with sub questions, that an analyst may ask in describing the text, offering the means to explore the experiential, relational and expressive values of words and grammatical features.

However because of anonymity, the author/s is effectively hidden and as mentioned above, certain surface features suggest that the writer(s) is/are not native English speakers, I suggest that it be unsafe to draw conclusions from the choice of the experiential and relational use of words and grammar. However, because of the writer's fluency in English, inferences may be drawn from the frequency of word use, complexity of sentences and expression.

Also, I take the view that effective critical analysis does not depend only on relations within a text but attempts to identify the ways the text illuminates social relations outside the text. This relates to Giddens' (1994:40-48) view of texts as a social practice in themselves and therefore:

> meanings are not bounded by the text but rather; meanings are never 'contained' in the texts as such, but are enmeshed in the flux of social life... the escape of its meaning from what its author originally meant, helps to reunite problems of textual interpretation with broader issues of social theory (p.45).

Therefore the inability to draw conclusions from some aspects of surface features does not preclude the employment of a critical approach to textual analysis.

Interpretation: Fairclough's second stage of textual inspection is taken from the point of view of participants and gives specific attention to the use of their existing language knowledge as the vehicle for analysis. Attention is initially paid to four areas:

1. *'surface of utterance'* – phonology, grammar, and vocabulary;

2. '*meaning of utterance'* –meanings within utterances

3. '*local coherence'* – meanings generated by relationships between utterances e.g. juxtaposition of words and phrases;

4. '*text structure and 'point''* – this relates to coherence to an identified discourse, in this case, its effectiveness as a programme planning document.

The value of use of the above areas of investigation will be tested in action. However an aspect of '*interpretation'* I predicted to be of specific interest to the study is the attention Fairclough gives to context. He notes the complexity of context, and supplies two entry points. '*Societal orders'* allows me to see the document located in a social institution and to involve non linguistic factors in its analysis. '*Interactional history'* sets the document in an on-going social context, with history and future effect.

Explanation: Under his heading '*explanation*' Fairclough (2001:138) suggests areas of analysis to shed light on cultural and social relationships, social identities, power relationships and ideologies. Since this area of investigation is closely connected to the purpose of the study, I employ his key words and, building on his questions, develop questions specific to the analysis of this text:

- Social determinants: What power relationships at situational, institutional and societal levels are revealed by this discourse, and what mechanisms in the text reflect and construct power relationships between a donor agency and MoE? What power relations does the document express and what part does it play in constructing them?

- Ideologies: Are ideologies expressed and by what means can I identify them? What is the likely impact of the ideologies?

- Effects: Is the document aimed at sustaining power relations between MoE and the donor agency or transforming them? Are the power relations overt or covert?

5.2   The analysis of the document

When reviewing a text, Fairclough (2001:15) advises starting by taking an overall impression of the document. The following are issues raised from an overall impression:

- the ownership of the document is ostensibly attributed to MoE and yet reads as if it were a Bank owned document;

- the proposed programme is extraordinarily ambitious, with little acknowledgement of the real constraints within the system, and the high level of external expertise required it implement it; and

- there is use of very dense language with a high level of repetition.

For this reason I firstly analyse the document under the headings:

- authoring, audience and ownership;

- programme actions described in the document; and

- the style and surface features of the writing, including textual conventions and devices.

I then go on to explore two aspects of how the document tackles potentially

challenging content:

- ethnic minority and gender concerns; and

- handling contentious issues.

The areas of investigation are not entirely discrete, but offer a means to structure

the discussion.

5.2.1 Authoring, audience and ownership

The Bank's logo is on the title page with the label, Technical Assistance

Consultant's Report. The title page also states that it is, '*Prepared by United*

Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Bangkok,

Thailand', with information that it is financed by the *Japan Special Fund*. We are

told it is *For Ministry of Education*. This attribution tells us that it is a document

prepared with support of a number of agencies but ostensibly on behalf of MoE. It

is an ambiguity in the document that, in paragraph 79, MoE itself is identified as a

risk to project success when it says, '*MoE's limited capacity to manage and*

implement the revised policies and strategies is a.. potential risk'.

The document is prepared by UNESCO, supported by the Japan Special Fund for

MoE, so external to the donor bank. However, a number of things give the

impression of a document written from the point of the development bank

supporting the programme. In Section 8 entitled the bank's '*Education Development Strategy'*, the development bank's sector policy is spelled out in some detail and includes a detailed rationale for the bank's decision to transfer support from primary to lower secondary sub sectors. There was considerable criticism by other donor agencies of this policy change and the document addresses these criticisms. The bank has recently moved its support from primary to secondary schooling and technical education in all its operations regionally, suggesting this is a policy decision from headquarters rather than a response to specific needs identified in Lao PDR. In a document written on behalf of the Ministry, I would expect the justification for change of sector support to be couched in terms of MoE's aspiration and linkage to their policy rather than the bank's.

A further factor giving the impression of a donor owned document is the space given to the bank's conditions for lending money. 16 out of 81 paragraphs are devoted to financing and procurement arrangements, detailing the conditions for release of money. The approach has been described as '*control by conditionalities'* by Riddell (2008:241) who sees this as a major means of donor control. The document sets up a situation in which money is released '*upon compliance with actions agreed in the policy matrix, as well as satisfactory implementation of the rest of the program'* (para 43). Paragraph 3 records:

> The program grant will be released in four tranches. The first tranche of $0.5 will be made available in grant effectiveness. The second and third tranches of $1.0 million each and a fourth tranche of £0.5 million will be released upon actions

agreed in the policy matrix as well as satisfactory progress in the implementation of the rest of the program.

Money is then released on completion of policy change as well as successful practical implementation. On looking at the policy matrix which forms a part of the document, I noted that some of the policy areas are only loosely linked to the main purpose of the input, the development of the lower secondary schooling sub sector for example, '*Develop a central inventory of all MOE physical assets (land, buildings, equipment, textbooks etc)*. They also include some which are not policy matters but refer to practical application. I cite, '*Develop, produce and distribute to lower secondary schools new textbooks and teacher guides'*, while other areas are designed to change the direction of government policy and include '*Encourage private sector participation in the provision of school education (Years 1-12)* and '*Increase education sector allowance'*.

As an aspect of a piece of contractual work I undertook for this bank, I received a bank document[31] justifying and permitting release of funds on the basis of adherence to the agreed conditions. A low level of adherence was demanded by the bank. The expression of *intention* to move towards fulfilling an agreed condition was accepted and the money released on its basis. This made me consider the donor's need to give. Donors give money and success of development aid can be measured by the amount of money released. When considering this I was reminded of a phone call, when I was working on a long

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[31] I received it in a professional context and cannot quote directly.

term contract in another country, from an official of a donor agency, telling me she had been given 35 million Euros to spend disburse and '*had I got any suggestions?*'

The question is asked whether the conditionalities are the means by which the development bank seeks to direct government policy or whether the document does in fact express Government policy aspiration. I am reminded of the Vice Minister who told me in friendly discussion in English that the Ministry welcomes donor controls and sees them as a spur to Lao action. The extension of the schooling cycle to twelve years by the addition of a year to lower secondary schooling is recorded in the document. The time scale for the extension was hotly argued against by donor agencies but since extension in one year is included in this document, it can be seen that GoL/MoE exerted influence on the content of the document.

In summary, the document is ostensibly written for MoE and yet reads as if it were a bank owned document. The first impression is of a donor using its power to influence the direction of reform, but on closer inspection the wielding of power is more complex. While not entirely challenging a donor's ability to wield power over the direction of an intervention, I argue that the process is neither clear nor straightforward, a point I develop later in this chapter and this thesis.

5.2.2   Programme actions described in the document

I identified the following features of the programme the document plans.

- the programme is very ambitious with unrealistic expectation of its impact;

- there is little acknowledgement of the real constraints within the system;

- there is lack of attention to previous interventions; and

- the plan lacks specificity in what needs to be done or how it will be done.

The discussion below expands below on these four features.

The ambitious nature of the project

The document records the expectation of wide ranging change bought about to the education system and on society at large. I include the full text of paragraph 76 which states the benefits the programme will bring:

> The direct benefits from the program will be two fold. First, benefits to the education sector will accrue from the policy reforms supported by the program. The policy areas, and supporting capacity building, that will lead to substantial long term efficiencies include: (i) a rational and standardized process for planning and budget preparation; (ii) development of an MTEF[32] for the education sector that will feed into the national MTEF; (ii) a policy framework for the recruitment and deployment of teachers that will promote efficient use of available teaching personnel; and (iii) an improved EMIS, including a TMIS, to enable more precise planning. Second, the program will lead to increased admission into LSE of an

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[32] Mid Term Expenditure Framework

estimated 13,300 students and increased participation of an estimated 56,400

students in 20 districts, from beginning to end of the project period. At national

level, the program will improve LSE internal efficiency, with the following indirect

benefits: (i) based on improved LSE quality and internal efficiency, an increase in

national LSE enrolments and graduates by 9,800 and 14,000 respectively during

the last year of the plan, as compared with no intervention, and this will result in

savings of around 15% on the cost per LSE graduate; (ii) increased number of

LSE graduates of an estimated 23,700 students, who will be able to go to USE[33],

from beginning to end of the plan period. The longer-term benefits will be to

provide more accessible and relevant formal lower secondary education to an

annual output of about 130,000 primary graduates at the end (of the programme).

Thus not only are a number of '*direct benefits'* to be brought about, but through a

chain of implementation their impact is magnified. I quote from paragraph 78

which claims that:

> Expansion of enrollments and improvements in quality of LSE education will result
>
> in a larger percentage of students graduating to higher levels of education leading
>
> to a better educated population. This is likely to result in higher employability,
>
> improved productivity and earning capacity. This will aid poverty reduction and
>
> improved social development.

I write out the essentials of the claim made in the paragraph to make clear the

chain of expectation:

> Expansion of enrolments and improvements in quality - *will lead to* - larger
>
> percentage of graduates - *will lead to* - better educated population – *will lead to* -

[33] Upper Secondary Education

higher employability, improved productivity and earning capacity - *will lead to* -

poverty reduction and improved social development.

At each level the links are asserted, relying on an unexamined expectation that one intervention will cause another. Each link in the chain relies on broad and unspecific concepts, that is, for example, '*better educated population',* and '*improved social development'* contains little meaning without further definition. Thus the link between the first statement '*expansion of enrolments and improvements in quality'* and the last, *'poverty reduction and improved social development'* is tenuous in the extreme and yet is asserted as if it expresses a realisable objective.

Lack of acknowledgment of constraints

Little attention is paid to the constraints to achievement of these ambitious objectives, other than the incapacity of government, expressed as '*Despite the rapid expansion of school education, the education sector in Lao PDR is weak and faces considerable challenges in addressing the needs of the sector'* (para 4). I address the notion of incapacity below. Here I note the document's attempts to minimise the very real constraints that the project will (and has) encountered. As an example of failure to acknowledge a constraint I cite an example from paragraph 39 which states, '*MoF will maintain projected allocations to MoE as agreed in the policy matrix, to support education reforms'.* A Lao development bank official explained in an interview in English that slow release of money by

MoF is a major constraint faced by MoE. She told me, '*You know the Ministry of Education is dependent on the Ministry of Finance for the release of funds, and they don't always have the same priorities'*. She went on to explain that '*many times the Ministry would like to honour its commitment but MoF won't release the funds'*. The inclusion of the commitment by MoF may be a device to invoke authority at a higher level to ensure the release, but the document effectively lays responsibilities on the shoulders of Ministry of Education officials which in reality they have no power to fulfil.

Lack of attention to previous interventions

In this paragraph I bring to the analysis contextual knowledge from my experience of education reform in Lao PDR. I look particularly at the plans to develop Education Management Information Systems (EMIS). At paragraph 16, the document makes reference to 'renovation' of the EMIS system. EMIS development was supported by a previous project, financed by the same donor, but which failed to finalise a workable system. The document does not mention the previous attempt, nor suggest that the reasons for that failure will be investigated to inform the new input. EMIS is currently supported by TA supplied by three donors. Although an appendix does refer to other existing and planned interventions, no measures to build from one project to the other are described. This point was confirmed by the Lao ministry manager of the previous project who in a business meeting for another consultancy, pointed dramatically to the shelves in her office, and asked me to look at the curriculum documents stacked there.

She told me all were prepared for the project to train minority ethnic teachers that had closed a year before, and at the end of the project the teacher training curriculum was discarded. I remember her saying something with this meaning, *'Look at those; we put money and time into making them, but now no one uses that, and now they are making a project to make some more. It's like the government has no memory.'*

Lack of specificity in what needs to be done and how it will be done

Verbs with a wide semantic space such as '*strengthen*' and '*improve'* are used, and they presuppose a joint understanding of what improved schooling or strengthened management looks like. The impact of reifying words and phrases is discussed in more detail in later in this subsection. Here I note that the document phrasing implies the move towards a desirable state e.g. '*poverty reduction and improved social development',* without telling us what this may look like or sketching a realistic process to get there.

5.2.3 Reflections on the style of writing and surface features

I now investigate what can be learned from the style of writing adopted. A register of project documentation is employed. Phrases such as, '*MOF shall ensure full disbursement of the MOE recurrent budget'*, and '*The objectives of the project are to enhance equitable access to lower secondary education, improve the quality of*

formal secondary education with an emphasis on lower secondary, and strengthen education management,' signal the use of a register of development aid. The absence of an identifiable author suggests a deliberate linkage to a set of universal meanings rather than the views of a particular person and time, in effect, decontextualising the content.

The document relies on a highly compacted style. Examples given throughout this chapter show not only chaining but the compacting of large amounts of information into a few sentences. Also words are compacted, as illustrated by the previously mentioned words *capacitating* and *tranching.* I questioned the readability of a document written in such a truncated style. I, who am fluent in English and the registers of development aid, found some phrases extremely dense and wondered about their accessibility to non native speakers. I give an example of a sentence taken from paragraph 35:

> A critical cross-cutting reform will be to progressively increase the share of GoL budget allocated to education, redress the imbalance between the investment and recurrent budget, increase teacher remuneration and put it more in line with regional standards in order to re-motivate teachers, reduce absenteeism and increase time on task.

A paragraph starting *'A critical cross cutting reform'* leads me to ask, is this intervention or another reform being described. '*Increase teacher renumeration'*, means increase teachers' salary. While there is no guarantee that some words are more accessible to non native speakers, my own approach is to use the

simpler term where possible. The next clause '*put it more in line with regional standards in order to remotivate teachers*' contains a number of unexplained assertions, which include teachers need remotivating; they will be motivated by salaries more in line with regional standards and this will '*reduce absenteeism and increase time on task'.* The structure of the sentence is another example of chaining which asserts links from '*A critical cross cutting reform*', through a series of sub clauses will, '*reduce absenteeism and increase time on task'.*

To better understand the level of difficulty experienced by non native speakers of English, I spoke to a project management team in a friendly conversation in English. They are all fluent in English having achieved Masters degrees from an Australian University. We talked about their understanding of project documents in general. One told me, '*We have to do what the document says. Sometimes it's quite clear, but sometimes we struggle to work out what it means. Luckily there's three of us so we can work it out* together'.

In examining writing style, I look in more detail at four features; technical register; textual devices; repetition and reification.
The impact of the use of the technical register and its relation to ideology

The document uses a register common to the document of development banks and, to complete a contract for the development bank, I was asked to adopt this style. I asked a development bank official how they saw the value of this particular style and presentation of information and was told the following, which I recorded

soon after:

> We try to keep information short and to the point. Technical documents should be
> clear and precise and not go off the point. It's important to keep the document on
> track, and not to confuse with extraneous knowledge. Also we want our
> documents to be at a certain level of professionalism.

The style is therefore adopted to indicate purely technical content and suppress contextual information which is seen as diverting attention from the main points. In this way ideology is suppressed. I use the term ideology as it is used by Fairclough (2001:2), as a set of taken for granted assumptions, '*closely linked to conventions and the power relations which underlie the conventions'.*

Two things are important here. Social action cannot take place without making social assumptions. Thus ideology cannot be eradicated and a passage from the document demonstrates that it, in fact, adopts an economistic ideology (para 2):

> (The project) will support the long-term education reform and development,
> leading to enhanced productivity, competitiveness, and economic development.

Also the expressed ideology is a selection from a set of possible ideologies. Education can alternately be constructed as a means of personal development; an expression of a human right and so on. The point made is that document offers its view of social reality is as an unchallengeable truth.

I considered the role the document plays in the discourse of donor aided

education reform, and came to see the document as a speech act (See Austin, 1962 and Searle 1970). A speech act is an action performed in language. Examples include promising, vowing, warning, and inviting. In this case the act is written rather than speech, but nevertheless fulfils a similar function. Habermas sees the speech acts as a means to establish normative functions relationships between parties. The document, in fact, records two speech acts; a promise by GoL and one by the donor agency. Thus the document establishes a normative relationship between GoL and the donor, which will be turned into a legally binding document which institutionalises the promises. A speech act does not depend on the quality or ethical nature of its articulation, that is a promise is a promise if it takes the form of a promise, whatever the intention. So while the place and purpose of the document in GoL/donor agency dialogue can be specified, there remains doubt about its efficacy as a support to an extensive change in the education system.

Textual devices used in the document

A notable textual device is to attribute some statements to GoL/MoE. An example is taken from paragraph 35:

> GOL recognizes that sustainable expansion of access to, and improvements in quality of, education will require not only additional resource mobilization, but also gains in efficiency and other forms of cost containment.

In this way, the impression is created of an existing agreement to the redirection a

greater percentage of the national budget to education. This did not happen. Significantly the document does not tell us where the decisions were made or the necessary associated actions are recorded.

The repetition of words and phrases

The repetition of words and phrases is a textual device which Fairclough (2001:95) suggests indicates a strong focus on the repeated concept. I reflect on two areas of repetition, the word '*quality'* and the word and phrase, *'capacity'* and '*capacity development'*. Because there is a great deal to say about the repeated use of these words and phrases they are given their own sections below.

A   The repetition of the word quality

The overall objective of the project is, in paragraph 1, expressed in terms of enhanced education quality:

> The overall objective of the BEDP is to contribute to poverty reduction through
>
> enhanced and more equitable improvements in education quality.

A computer check of the main document showed the term quality is to be found forty times. Three of these references are to the name of the project and two in side headings, leaving 35 references to quality as a concept. The following is an example of its use at paragraph 16:

> Improved quality and relevance of formal primary and lower secondary education
>
> will be achieved based on: (i) improving the management of the delivery of

teacher education; (ii) developing a comprehensive but flexible teacher training curriculum; (iii) capacitating all teacher trainers through a training of trainers program; (iv) increasing the recruitment of and rate of retention of teachers and improving their status through teacher incentives; (v) improving the quality of pre-service teacher training; (vi) providing learning materials and adapting them to local conditions; (vii) improving student assessment systems etc.

Thus improved quality and relevance are major objectives of programme implementation. I looked for close synonyms on the document and found only the word '*standards*' which occurs twice and 'e*quity'*, which I see as an aspect of quality, four times. The focus is then specifically on '*quality*'.

Paragraphs 9-11 are devoted to the discussion of '*quality*' but do not define quality nor suggest what it may look like in practice. The failure of one child in two to achieve basic literacy is given as an exemplar of lack of quality (para 9). The nearest approach to definition is the statement, '*Quality is a function of internal systematic efficiencies'* (para 9). Thus the definition is circular, that is defined by itself and assumes prior understanding. Paragraphs 9-11 are dedicated to identifying a rather random selection of the barriers to achieving quality:

- dropout rate;

- over rapid expansion of the education system;

- financial constraints;

- lack of text books; and

- poor teacher training.

I looked in government documents for definitions of quality, and found very little. An MoE check list[34] gives 52 criteria for a good school. The criteria recorded provide an aspirational rather than currently achievable level of quality schooling. In the face of an unclear definition of quality, the technical assistance team is given the role of fleshing out what quality in education means.

B   The repetition of the phrases 'capacity' and 'capacity development'

Two closely related phrases used repetitively in the document are '*capacity*' and *'capacity development'*. Because of the concern of the study for the transmission of knowledge/skills/information, I place particular emphasis on the use in the document of the concepts of capacity and capacity development or building.

Inspection showed the use of the terms capacity and capacity development or building 21 times in the 19 pages of the main body of the document. Capacity development is located in a negative context, that is capacity development is needed because capacity is lacking. The following is an example (para 80) of the expressed approach to capacity development:

> MOE's limited capacity to manage and implement the revised policies and strategies is another potential risk. While implementation of the project by technical personnel based on a policy of decentralization to provincial and district levels is essential for capacity building, these potential risks will be mitigated through: (i) provision of extensive advisory support for subsectoral and program

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[34] The check list is neither dated nor attributed.

planning and management; and (ii) technical assistance to ensure that an appropriate legislative and regulatory framework is in place.

In this way the MoE is characterised as incapable, with a need to be rescued by 'extensive *advisory support'* and '*TA'.*

The text uses few qualifiers. Those used are largely negative, with a particular emphasis on incapacity. A number of statement explicitly to MoE incapacity, using words such as '*strained'*, *'weak'* and '*limited'*. The following are examples:

- MOE capacity for implementation is strained, implementation structures for various projects need to be integrated and harmonized (para 21);

- weak institutional capacity for planning, management, and delivery of education (para 7);

- limited leadership and ownership of the policy reform process and lack of consistency in policy and strategic decision making pose potential risks (para 79); and

- MOE's limited capacity to manage and implement the revised policies and strategies is another potential risk (para 80).

The qualifier 'extensive' is used twice to indicate the intensive nature of capacity building needed, in the phrases, '*The project will support strengthening of the EMIS....with extensive capacity building' (para 35)* and as a means to achieve an objective (para 34):

> improved effectiveness and relevance of education management in provinces, districts and schools, especially in the related areas of information systems, planning, budgeting, and financial management, alongside extensive capacity building.

A system in great need is sketched, but without giving detailed analysis of just what that need is, or specific suggestions of how it might be addressed except through, '*capacity development*'.

Capacity development and TA

The numerous references to the need for capacity development (or building) in itself creates a cumulative impression of weak existing capacity. There are, however, few clues as to how capacity may be developed except for heavy reliance on external expertise. External expertise is recruited to '*compensate for.. inadequacy*' *(*para 21*).* TA is given a very strong role. For example, in paragraph 80, the following is recorded, '*adequate TA must be provided to compensate for, and strengthen, MOE's limited capacity to undertake project related activities*' and at para 70, '*The consulting services are designed to support the project as well as build longer-term capacity for planning, management and delivery of basic education.*

TA, then, is given the role of *'supporting the project'*, which I presume is undertaking project related work. In this way TAs '*mitigate risks*' and '*ensure*' the legal framework. The number of TA person months given in this document over four years is 202 person months of consulting services (para 70). This equates to more than 50 months of input per year. The very high levels of external support again suggest a low level of existing skill and I know from friendly conversations with project managers, the practice places extraordinary management burdens on

the small management teams assigned by MoE to manage projects, because of induction needs and managing their assignment and reports. The use of high levels of TA is a common approach in Lao PDR. I looked at the planning document of programme under preparation in 2010 and saw that 220 months of external support is planned in three years of implementation.

As noted above, TA consultants are engaged to spell out the exact nature of capacity building activities and the document indicates a very low starting point, seeing external expertise in a compensatory role. The situation is bound to influence the action of incoming TA.

I tried to divide the resources given to capacity development for fiscal training into general fiscal training and training in the use of the donor's financial and procurement systems. The two activities are not recorded separately in the programme actions plans and my experience suggests that much effort goes into training in the use of the donor's systems.

The document is located in and promotes a discourse of incapacity which relies on circular definitions, that is attention will be given to quality because quality is lacking and capacity building is needed because capacity is weak or low.

An argument underpinning this thesis and developed in later chapters is that capacity is not lacking in Lao PDR but that specific knowledge/skills/information is needed for effective reform. This is a situation not particular to a developing

country. At all times of change in developed as well as developing countries, new skills are needed and, I suggest, the move to frame development in incapacity cuts us off from the insights which might be gained by more detailed analysis of what capacities are in existence and how best to develop those which are needed.

Reification of words and phrases

Much meaning in the document relies on a speculated, but untested, common understanding of terms, two of which were considered above, quality and capacity development.

The terms have become reified, that is used as if they are objects or ends in themselves. Giddens (1997:131) warns that reification leads to '*erasing indeterminacy'* with the result that the inherent constraints, complexity and ambiguity of the situation may be overlooked. Tsitsipis (2007:626) argues similarly that the reification of social phenomena masks their essentially indeterminate and contingent nature. Reification is in itself a social action which is used in this document to limit variables and a linear view of capacity development is constructed. Reifying the concepts of quality and capacity development leads to the selection of routine actions and tidy answers, in what is in fact a very untidy and complex situation.

5.2.4 Ethnic minority and gender concerns

There is a strong focus on the education of minority ethnic children and girls. This is demonstrated by 18 references to issues associated with the education of ethnic minority children in the main document and the inclusion of the MoE *Gender and Ethnic Group Development Action Plan* (GEGDAP) in Appendix 9. However the plan exhibits generalised expression, as demonstrated by the objectives recorded below:

> **Objectives.** The objectives of the Gender and EG[35] development plan is to ensure that all Program and Project components and associated activities will assist the achievement of the goals of improving access to and the quality of basic education. This applies especially to access for ethnic pupils, particularly girls, with the overall aim to develop measures targeted to ethnic groups in disadvantaged areas to mainstream the principles of equity and gender equality.

Verbs such as *'ensure'*, '*a*ssist' and the phrase '*mainstream the principles'* relate to *'existing'* jointly understood actions, rather than new solutions. This is further demonstrated by the following practical activities which include school building, the provision of scholarships, greater recruitment of ethnic minority teachers and disaggregation of data collected for EMIS. The approach further demonstrates *'erased indeterminacy'*, in this case the continued implementation of solutions which have not proved entirely successful in the past.

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[35] Ethnic Groups

The GEGDAP does record attempts to gain a more informed perspective:

> 1.4   Conduct LSE studies on access
>
> Include gender/ethnic-specific factors into (i) Study 1: Baseline factors that inhibit participation and retention in LSE, and (ii) Study 2: Alternative modes of LS delivery, modes of subsidy, and nature of incentives to encourage enrolments. For each study include measures for consultations with teachers and students of different sexes, ethnicity, ages and income levels.

Thus ethnic and gender issues are subsumed into a generalised study of inhibiting factors and alternate modes of delivery, and so are not given the focus they deserve. It may be that the suppression of detailed investigation of issues concerning the provision of services to minority ethnic groups is designed to avoid conflict with GoL.

Issues relating to minority ethnic students and girls are conflated. Three paragraphs (29-31) of the main document are devoted to '*Ethnic groups and gender issues'.*

> Ethnic groups (i.e. non-Lao ethnic groups) live in the majority of districts and villages assisted under the BEDP. Five of the six BEDP provinces have high percentages of ethnic populations, ranging from 41% to 98%, with three having percentages over 60%. These ethnic groups will enjoy the benefits accruing to those districts and villages participating in the BEDP. Specific actions have been integrated into the program design to reflect issues unique to the educational needs of ethnic groups and girls. Under component 1, scholarships will be provided for lower secondary students of ethnic non-Lao groups in poor villages of

target districts, and 70% of these scholarships will target girls.

The conflation of gender issues and those of ethnicity offers another example of unwillingness to identify or challenge existing constraints in depth and to seek tidy answers. The study has not investigated in any depth wide range of issues impacting on poor academic performance in rural areas, but my experience of working in Lao PDR suggests that there are a number of constraints over and above those that can be addressed by the interventions proposed above. I would add:

- school seen as 'foreign', by both minority ethnic and poor Lao families living in rural areas;

- the irrelevance of curricula and teaching methodologies to a subsistence economy with a lack of vision of possible benefits to be gained by completing education;

- in spite of political rhetoric by GoL recorded in policy documents, little real commitment to address issues linked to poverty and isolation of ethnic groups.

The planning document appears to offers solutions to be applied at field level while failing to acknowledge or address the more difficult structural issues. It also proposes provision of solutions which have not been fully effective in the past.

5.2.5   Handling contentious issues

I have suggested that the document suppresses contextual and ideological issues. However I record two areas which identify the view of the donor and by

implication, obliquely criticise GoL. At paragraph 13 the document records:

> Decentralization should be reassessed and only undertaken at a pace compatible
> with local implementation capacities and MOE's monitoring capacity.

GoL's approach to decentralisation was rushed and not thought-through and implemented with little preparation of people or administrative systems. Currently control of budgets is devolved to provincial governors, who have final decision making powers over budget allocation and may not prioritise education, nor award it financial support.

Enforced resettlement of ethnic villages is also referred to (para 28), under the sub heading '*Involuntary Resettlement'* and says:

> Expansion of existing schools under the project will not require any new land.
> Construction of new schools will be carried out only on vacant and idle land
> owned by the Government that is free from all encumbrances, habitation, dispute
> or controversy, and mostly adjacent to existing schools. Only sub projects
> categorized as C in accordance with the bank's policy on involuntary resettlement
> and its policies in the Operations Manual, and meeting agreed selection criteria for
> school sites (Supplementary Appendix C) will be selected.

The statement refers obliquely to a very contentious issue but in a way which avoids confrontation with the GoL. I am pleased to record that since 2010 the practice of enforced resettlement of minority ethnic villages has been abandoned by GoL, in the face of strong international pressure.

A *discourse not used: change*

It occurs to me that in writing this chapter I have used the word '*change*' a number of times. Though the programme promotes considerable change, change to systems, change to social relationships, people's roles and their life chances, the word change is not used once. In this way, the notion of education reform as societal change is suppressed. Change can be a threatening process and its suppression plays down the impact of the predicted interventions. I suggest that donors and government collude to play down the societal impact of education reform.

This subsection reveals that contentious issues are recognised, but discussed obliquely and direct address avoided. The avoidance of issues and the implementation of bland solutions is a significant factor in the relative failure of development interventions to raise the school attainment of children in rural areas.

5.3 Review of the mode of analysis adopted

In this section I review of the use of Fairclough's processes of analysis and their value as a means to achieve the objectives of the study.

Description

In spite of taking care to avoid unwarranted deductions from the selection and

juxtaposition of analysis of surface features, description was a powerful tool in revealing identifying surface features which illuminate structures underlying the text. The very dense structuring of the text was revealed as a device which has the effect of constructing education reform as a purely technical venture, a move to suppress ideology and present reform action as a matter of transfer of knowledges, skill and information. In this way concepts such as quality and capacity are presented as a technical concern, ones which the current education system lacks and education reform is constructed as a process of supplying the capacities to fill the gaps.

Before the analysis of this document, I saw the references to incapacity as an unfortunate descriptor of the recipients of aid. Through the inspection in this chapter, I saw it fulfilling a much more powerful role, in its ability to construct a discourse of incapacity which wields considerable power to shape interventions.

Overdependence on generalisation of expression also has impact on practice. It places unwarranted responsibility on the TA consultants to turn the generalisations in the document into doable actions. In this way external consultants are able, in effect, to set the direction and content of the reform.

Interpretation

As noted above, Fairclough's (2001:118) proposed second stage *'interpretation'* focuses on the interpretation of texts by discourse participants. Because the

response of the participants, whether writers or recipients, is unknown, this aspect of interpretation does not offer a means of analysis for this document. However in the same stage Fairclough focuses attention on the contexts of implementation and this has provided powerful support to the analysis.

The document apparently addresses a situation which only tangentially matches the actual context of implementation of education reform with the possibility of considerable mismatch. This is an example of coherence, or more specifically lack of coherence, between the document and the world (Fairclough 2001:65). Inspection using a notion of *'interactional history'* reveals a document set in discourses wider than those of Lao PDR. Wider discourses include an international discourse of development aid and the discourses specific the supporting bank. Attention to '*interactional history'* also allowed me to speculate on the future impact of the discourse. I suggest that this document attempts to avoid political, cultural and social complexities. This may be seen as an attempt to construct actions which will be accepted by GoL. It could also be seen as epitomising an approach so firmly located in an existing paradigm of donor support to education reform that a more flexible, responsive approach is not considered.

Explanation

The questions under the heading of explanation allowed reflection on the power relationships. Commentators on development aid still suggest that donors wield

authority through fiscal power. Inspection of the document identified a more complex situation than is commonly predicted. In particular I note the power over content and direction delegated to TA consultants.

I noted the ambiguities over authorship and ownership of the document. While it ostensibly belongs to GoL, the document clearly reflects the position of the supporting development bank. The level of conditionalities gives the donor control over the direction of the reform yet the document is constructed to suppress contentious issues. In this way GoL exerts considerable power over what can and cannot be addressed. There is a further ambiguity raised by the authority given to external TA to define the content of reform activity.

An area of reflection is the very negative view of MoE it promotes, yet GoL has endorsed the documentation and allowed it to be published in its name. I ask myself what their motivation is for not challenging it. It occurs to me that the agreement to the project is made by policy makers concerned to secure the means for reform. Officials seated above the MoE may be without knowledge of education and may be more concerned with obtaining financial support than the specific wording or ideology. The achievement of the grant may present power gains both in control of the money and in the gaining of symbolic capital. Another factor may be the confidence of GoL to contain change within existing ideology, as demonstrated by the Prime Minister's Speech quoted in Chapter Three, a solution which allows acceptance of loans and grants, with confidence that change can be managed. However, these are very speculative points and do not

fully explain either the very negative view promoted or its acceptance.

I particularly note the attempt to present the project as a purely technological intervention, that is, as a matter of transfer of skills, knowledge and expertise, divorced from existing beliefs, behaviours, values, attitudes and practices. However all social action expresses an underlying ideology and the document presents an explicitly economistic view of education. At the same time areas which may be essential to achieving positive change are ignored. These may include education for political development or for social cohesion. Contentious areas of intervention, such as ethnic minority children, are played down and I argue that the attempt to decontextualise education and its reform, with attendant linear solutions, is significant in depressing the achievement of past and present interventions. The commissioners/writer/s reflect an effort to maintain existing power relations and 'not upset the apple cart'. The document defines a relationship between donor and GoL which is aimed at maintaining the status quo.

5.4   Conclusion to the chapter

The chapter has tested procedures for the analysis of texts created in and responding to contexts very different from those they were designed for, modern Britain. With some adjustment I found the procedure of analysis generalisable to the analysis of a text constructed and located in the very different social and cultural setting of donor aided education reform in Lao PDR. Adjustments included lowering emphasis on selection of grammar and vocabulary, metaphors and culturally bound interpretations and focussing attention more on the wide range of

contexts of construction and use, indicators of power structures and relations, and using analysis as a means to consider future effects.

The strength and challenge of Fairclough's procedures is that they provide generic questions which the analyst must develop to meet the purposes of her own study. I am less clear of the value of Fairclough's division of approaches into stages. I found it necessary to move between the stages in the analysis; for example the reification of terms both reflects and creates power structures as experienced by the writer/s and impacts on future events. I go on testing the framework in the next chapters, in the hope of creating a procedure that can be used in a number of situations in which producer and analyst do not share a common first language. In the next chapter I explore in depth the discourse which I see as having substantive power in donor aided education reform in Lao PDR, that of capacity development.

CHAPTER SIX

CAPACITY, CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGES TRANSFER

6.0   Overview of the chapter

Previously in this thesis I have looked at two areas of discourse, that of the ESWG meetings and of a programme planning document. I noted the strong emphasis on capacity development in programme planning and because capacity development is related to one of the central concerns of the study, the transfer of knowledges, I investigate their construction and reception by recipients over the next two chapters. Capacity development refers to the offering and acquisition of a wide range of knowledge/information/skills and processes associated with education reform. Where I refer to a generalised processes of upgrading and do not refer to specific set of knowledge/information/skills and processes I use the word 'knowledges' as used by Fairclough (2003:3) in his discussion of the relation of discourse, knowledge and social change as a way of referring to a body of new 'knowledges' people meet at a time of change.

In Chapter Four a gap between policy and practice was identified and in this and the next chapter I look at capacity development as a strategy to put policy into practice. In this chapter I investigate the ways new knowledges are offered, by examining in some depth a common strategy for the development of capacity, the

employment of external expertise. In the next chapter I analyse the ways capacity development activities are received and impact on practice and because the study takes a critical stance, I examine the effectiveness of capacity development activities as a vehicle for improved agency and greater emancipation.

I approach the task in a number of ways. The first is to gain a clearer understanding of the concept of capacity development. I have noted the central role it plays in the discourse of development aid but, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, how it is often expressed in unspecific terms. I go on to construct a means of analysis for the chapter's data. I then look at knowledges existing in new education system and go on to explore eight aspects of knowledges transfer.

Data for this chapter was largely produced by semi structured and informal interviews, as well as by drawing on my own experience as an external consultant.

6.1　Defining capacity and capacity development

The worldwide extent and importance of capacity development activities is demonstrated by OECD (2006), which gives the figure of more than 150 million US dollars, more than a quarter of development aid, spent in technical cooperation in recent years, overwhelmingly on capacity development activities.

To start the exploration, I undertook an internet search for the phrase capacity development. Almost all returns connected the phrase to development aid and so I see the term is closely associated with development aid and its use signals a register of development aid. I then looked at the use of the terms capacity and capacity development in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005). The document commits signatories to capacity development as a core principle of the development agenda. The following is recorded at paragraph 4:

> We commit ourselves to taking concrete and effective action to address the remaining challenges, including:
>
> Weaknesses in partner countries' institutional capacities to develop and implement results-driven national development strategies.

The Paris Declaration goes on to record at paragraph 24, that donors commit to:

> Align their analytic and financial support with partners' capacity development objectives and strategies, make effective use of existing capacities and harmonise support for capacity development accordingly (Indicator 4).

The above statements propose capacity development as central to effective development. They also establish the development of capacity as a key principle; accept it as an antidote to *'weakness'* in existing systems; and, probably the least adhered to in Lao PDR, recommend the '*effective use of existing capacities*'.

I turned to the publications of development agencies for definitions of both capacity and capacity development. The OECD Development Co-operation

Directorate[36] web page quotes the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) guidelines and sketches a broad view of capacity by saying:

> Capacity refers to the ability of people, organisations, and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully.

and of capacity development specifying:

> the process by which people, organisations and society as a whole create, strengthen and maintain their capacity over time.

The OECD document positions capacity as something touching everyone in a society because of its role in helping a society in '*managing affairs successfully*'. Capacity development, then, is a process, aimed at instituting and maintaining capacity. Both comments place capacity development in the wider context of a society's development. A major development bank through its expression, '*Capacity Development (CD) is about securing a country's ability to manage its own affairs*' extends the same notion when it links capacity building to the means of '*running a modern state*', although the components that distinguish a modern state are not recorded. Capacity development then contains the notion of state building.

The description given by another respected development agency, UNESCO, in a strategy paper, describes capacity development as a process with four dimensions:

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[36] http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/16/1/46682972.pdf

- improving the competencies and performance of individual officers;

- improving organisational performance (mandate, structure, international management of organisational units);

- improving public administration to which these units belong (role of public service, rules of civil service management, formal and informal incentives);

- improving the social, economic and political context (limiting the constraints and strengthening incentives).

The first three bullet points relate to previous definitions; the fourth adds attention to improving social economic and political contexts and limiting constraints, giving a human rights dimension, and, by extension, to a central concern of the study, emancipation. The UNESCO paper also argues that the above dimensions do not exist independently, but are, at different times, integrated in different ways and that all are necessary to achieve improvements in the functioning of systems.

Commentators on international development added further dimensions. Davies (2011:5), in her analysis of capacity development in education in fragile states, reinforces the broad definition, and adds a regional perspective when she says:

> Capacity development in education systems ... requires a broad definition. It clearly goes beyond the knowledge and skills of individuals into the realm of governance. Effective capacity development strategies will also depend on the social, economic and political context of the country or region in question.

Her definition takes in governance, with strategies guided by social, political and contextual factors.

Samoff (2004:401) argues that the need for capacity is increasing, as the approach to development aid, based in greater government ownership, creates a need for increased knowledges and Chambers (2007:39) makes a similar point when he notes that reforms proposed by the Paris Declaration depend on new and greater demands for administrative capacity. This chimes with the views of MoE officials, noted in Chapter Five, who saw demands on them greatly increasing.

To get a view of development in education not located in international development, I looked to Scott (2000a:57) who discusses professional development in education and refers to it as '*the progressive development of appropriate skills or competencies'.* His insight is important in two ways: first is the notion that development is progressive, that is, he rejects professional development as a collection of one off activities and sees it as an on-going process. The second is the need for the identification of appropriate skills and competencies, implying a need for detailed analysis of the both the target skills and the steps to get there. I note the similarity of semantic space of the expressions '*capacity development'* and '*professional development'*. While they are not exact synonyms, my experience and the analysis in the previous chapter suggests that much of what is implemented or attempted to be implemented in donor aided education reform in Lao PDR is in fact professional development. In the previous chapter I noted that capacity development inherently suggests lack of capacity, but professional development contains the notion of responsible and appropriate responses to change.

From the discussion above, I see that capacity development is *'critical'* to development and covers individual, systemic, institutional, social, economic and political aspects, with a focus on the outcomes. The planning document reviewed in the previous chapter refers to the provision of schools, DEB offices, electricity and computers, books and footballs as capacity development activities, presumably to indicate their place in strengthening the capacity of the whole education system. If infrastructural development is included then the term capacity development inhabits the same semantic space as *'development'* itself. Equivalence to development runs me into a circular definition; capacity development is needed because people, countries or societies lack capacity.

Riddell (2008:207) records a similar difficulty to my own in describing what capacity development is and consequently how it might be promoted. He makes the point that worldwide there appears to be a lack of hard information from which to draw generalised conclusions (p.208). This chimes with the view of OECD (2006) which records the development of sustainable capacity as one of the most difficult areas of development practice. If, as I suggest above, capacity development is closely associated with development itself, then reflection on the processes and practices of capacity development may shed light on development itself.

The broad approach and the generalised expression lead me to consider how I can gain a definition which allows me to reflect on the place of capacity development in donor aided reform in Lao PDR in a meaningful way. As a starting

point I created the diagram below, identifying some of its major elements and key areas for investigation.

6.1.1   Mapping the elements and contexts of capacity development

The significance and impact of context is a central concern of the study. Rappleye (2006:224) identifies an ambiguity in the context of knowledges transfer, on the one hand the paramount importance given to context and on the other, the relatively little attempt to '*move beyond the commonplace assertion that 'context matters'.* In the diagram below I attempt to identify the main elements and contextual influences on donor aided education reform in Lao PDR. I drew on the work of Davies *(*2011: 9) who identifies four levels or '*dimensions for capacity development in situations of government fragility'*. I also drew on a diagram produced by Fowler (1997:193), discussed by Brinkerhoff (2010:74) showing five levels of change. Interestingly Fowler places *'resources'* centrally, which I suggest can be interpreted as placing existing and potential human capital, as well as financial and infrastructural resources as the core of development activity and moving outwards in bands indicating '*skills and knowledge'*; '*organisation'*; '*politics and power'* with the outside band recording *'incentives'*. Axes indicate the '*degree of difficulty and complexity'; 'magnitude of change'*, and '*time required'.* The work is also supported by that of Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008:97) who produced a diagram demonstrating the processes of policy borrowing from country to country.

The diagram below takes the broadest possible view of capacity development,

and, in line with the models drawn on, records both implementation and contextual issues. It indicates the interrelation of contextual factors, culture, politics and ideologies, with practical issues of implementation. The diagram relates to a currently politically stable country, in which dialogue between donors and government is established, in which change is accepted and to some extent agreed. The analysis is designed to aid exploration of the central concern of the study, the ways the practices and process of capacity development impact on the rural child.

Diagram One: Elements and contexts of capacity development in donor aided reform in Lao PDR

		Long term vision of the education system			
Globalised ideologies practices and goals	Existing and target system knowledges	Existing and target institutional knowledges	Existing and target personal knowledges	System, institutional and personal attitudes and norms	Value systems of Government and donor agencies underpinning choices
Regional ideologies, practices and goals	Open and hidden cultural norms	System development	Personal development	Selection of new knowledges	
		Infrastructural development	Institutional development	Ideologies driving selection of knowledges	
National values, practices and goals	Available resources	Distribution of resources	Existing authority structures, roles and responsibility	Target authority structures, roles and responsibility	
		National and international education norms			

The diagram shows that capacity development is constructed of a range and variety of discourses, which can represent conflicting and contradictory perspectives and is set in a wide range of social cultural political and value contexts. Both Brinkerhoff (2010:67) and Davies (2011:9) construct capacity development in terms of levels and Brinkeroff sees significant interdependencies

amongst these levels. I take this view and see meaning produced as levels rub together. Brinkerhoff (2010) states that the attention of providers of capacity development has been focussed on deficits in resources, skills/knowledge and organisation and that too little attention has been paid to politics, power and incentives. The study takes the position that capacity development is a social action and the investigation of what people do and say can illuminate the cultural and political systems in which actions are embedded, even if they are not acknowledged in policy directives. The diagram describes capacity development as socially constructed, inspection of which can illuminate social action, and I go on to construct system of inspection by which the assumptions and understandings that underlie the policies and practices, ideologies and power structures can be identified. Again I lean heavily on the work of Fairclough (2001: Chapters Five and Six).

6.2   Means of analysis used in the chapter

Because much data for the chapter was collected through translated interview, I place the focus of analysis on two of Fairclough's areas of investigation,' '*interpretation*' and '*explanation*'. '*Investigation'* links to the diagram above, and sets the discourse of capacity development in the context of the other numerous discourses which make up the order of discourse of development aid to education reform and allows reflection on non linguistic factors. It also sets the discourse of capacity development in an on-going social situation, which reveals both history and future effects. '*Explanation*' focuses the investigation on the exploration of

power relations and the impact of existing and changing ideologies. In the analysis of the data for the chapter, I gave attention to the following questions:

- ***Social determinants:*** What power relationships at situational, institutional and societal levels are revealed in the selection of knowledges and their means of transfer? Where do those knowledges come from and who has the power to select them?

- ***Ideologies:*** What ideologies are revealed, whose ideologies hold sway and whose value systems are influential?

In the next chapter I gave particular attention to the following questions:

- ***Effects****:* How do the activities associated with capacity development reveal power relationships between actors at differing levels of donor aided education reform? Can I identify increased agency and the emancipation of actors?

6.3   Existing capacity

In the definitions of capacity development previously included in the chapter, capacity development was largely defined by its end product, that is improved law, management systems or teaching methods, with the transfer of knowledges the means to achieve those ends. The issue raised is concerning present means of the transfer of knowledges and the capacities developed. To set the scene for this exploration, I explore the knowledges currently existing in the education system in Lao PDR.

A generalised lack of capacity among officials of the MoE and field officials does

not gel with my experience and I saw high levels of competence in the existing system. As an aspect of data collection, I interviewed four DEOs in remote and rural areas. As mentioned in Chapter Two one interview was cut short. All were interviewed through translation. In a system where the money is scarce and infrastructure poor, field officials take great responsibility for making the education system function in the districts. They are also in the front line of putting many new policies into practice.

Capacity in the field

My field visits required these officials to travel with me to schools. I observed their detailed knowledge of their district. Visits to remote schools revealed they know the teachers by name and are recognised and welcomed by school staff. I was impressed by a deep and realistic understanding of their territory, of the issues involved and local strengths and weaknesses. Inevitably they construct problems in practical terms. One DEO told me in translated interview, '*I try to do the reform but my main problem is how to get enough teachers, text books and chalk into the schools, and to get all the children to school. This is a full time job'.* As well as indicating his perception of the real focus of his work, he articulated something which came up a number of times during the study, the perception of the reform as separate from the real business of implementing the education system.

A DEO from another district analysed a donor-supported teacher education in-service course that had recently taken place in his district, in teaching/learning

methodology. The Active Learning course was described in Chapter Two and gives teachers a total of eleven days input. He made a number of points about the course in general:

> The course has to be longer. It takes time for the teachers to access new ideas. They need to see the ideas in action, how they can be implemented in the classroom, for example, they need examples to show them how to be flexible and creative in implementing it (the new curriculum).

He makes a number of thoughtful points which include the newness of the ideas which he sees to be distanced from existing practices and, because of this, teachers needing more time to internalise them. In particular, he identifies difficulty in implementing practices when you have not seen them in action. The analysis seems close to that any experienced educator would make. He went on to reflect on the adjustment needed to move from one way of working to another, for children as well as teachers:

> The children are used to finding the answers in the book. It is a new way of working that has not existed in Lao so far and nobody has seen how to use it.

His detailed knowledge of classroom practice and his reflections suggest to me, not a lack of knowledges, something which may be seen as an unacknowledged gap between the existing and target knowledges, resulting in failure to build on existing knowledges.

The second DEB official quoted above expresses this notion of the new

classroom methods being a long way from the existing skills and by implication outside the present skills and abilities of both teachers and children. I would suggest that the distance between the existing and target knowledges is a factor in allowing/disallowing new actions to be adopted and new ways embedded in existing systems. Some knowledges have to start from scratch, because they relate to new technologies, ICT being the prime example, but the more generic knowledges associated with teaching, administration and management are already in use. This raises issues of whether existing knowledges are compatible with the new and can provide a building point or whether they must be overridden and replaced. This is something further addressed in the next chapter.

Existing capacity in the MoE

As a further example of existing positive knowledges and practice, I reflect on my time in 2010 when I worked as an external consultant to a newly formed MoE ESQAC centre, with a desk in their office. I take the following from field notes written at the time for this research.

> The Centre was set up under a project. It is young yet, barely two years old and its terms of reference are still somewhat unclear. The Director told me he wants to identify exactly its function, in order to consolidate its work. Salaries are paid by the MoE, but finance for development work has to come from donors. Funding is expected from by a development bank, to provide QA systems for higher and technical education. For its other areas of work, the deputy director (DD) told me, *'we have to do what the donors will support,'* so they are dependent on donor

policies and choices.

The DD is learning about QA from a UNESCO initiative, is also undertaking a PhD in Japan, in Japanese, as well as the research I am involved in. He remains a lecturer at the University and takes tutorials in the corner of the office. While I was there he was given the job of overseeing the competitions for scholarships in Vietnam, because if his knowledge of Vietnamese. The task involves some processing some 3,000 scripts.

As generally in MoE, the Director General takes a strong administrative, leadership and ceremonial role, while to development work falls to the rest of the team under the direction of the deputy DD. He has had a surprising amount of say in the composition of the team, telling me '*I brought in my own people';* in consequence there are a number of young proactive members amongst the traditionally recruited team members. Perhaps even more surprising, is the leeway he is given by his Director, who has instituted a very high level of delegation, the deputy director taking the lead in the activities identified above.

The office is long and thin, and very crowded. Eleven people sit at small desks almost touching. My desk was fitted in, with some difficulty next to that of the director, in front of the filing cabinets next to the back wall, under the windows. People had to keep apologising for disturbing me to get to the cabinets. The director sits by the window, furthest away from the door and the status can be read as working down from there. Among the eleven officials there are four women - three are young and sit nearest the door. One slightly older has a higher position and sits in the middle. She is the office administrator. Two of the young

women were recruited at the request of the DD and are at present under probation - they are preparing to play a fuller part later. Each official has a relatively up to date computer and there is a background sound of soft computer music. There is remarkably little paper around - the officials preferring electronic rather than paper communication. The average age is quite young, the DD in his mid thirties, the others apart from the director in their twenties, thirties and forties. There is also a great deal of interaction and collaboration, joking and people looking up from their desks and addressing questions to the relevant colleagues, but always with politenesses to ensure interruption is appropriate. People address each other by honorifics related to their positions, that is in English, older brother, deputy director, older sister or office manager. People arrive on time and go home on time, leaving their desks whatever work is outstanding. It's a nice place to work.

This office may not be typical. I know that Lao offices, just as those anywhere in the world, have tensions and disagreements. This particular working atmosphere may be brought about by a particular combination of director and DD, but it works, I would argue, because of, rather than in spite of, working in a Lao manner. That is, the division of responsibility between director and deputy director is effective, the address of colleagues by their role and status rather than in personal terms reduces interpersonal conflict and the generally relaxed atmosphere makes the office a good place to work and the amount achieved during my time there was to be congratulated. My overall view is of a highly effective group of people, whose effectiveness is only diminished by the wide range of activity they are required to address.

I am reminded that through my interactions with actors in donor aided education

reform, over and over again, they stressed the distinctiveness of Lao ways of doing things. The Lao way of doing things has strengths as shown above and I am aware that each strength also has a downside. In the table below I note some obvious Lao qualities and my perception of their downsides to the process of education reform.

Table Seven   Perceptions of the strengths and downsides of Lao cultural practices in relation to education reform

Positive attributes	Downsides
Respect for interpersonal relations and authority allowing a structured approach	Difficulty in expressing opposite views The impact of ineffective managers magnified
Care for people's self respect and well being	Care can be put before professional expectation
Close social networks that support communication	Networks can be status based and exclusive
Important principles of equity for women and minority ethnic communities articulated in law	Few structures for implementing the laws Poor governance leading to corruption practices.
A strong sense of national identity and loyally	Political repression. Exclusion of minority ethnic perspectives

The table does not attempt the impossible task of summing up Lao culture, but aims to show that the cultural attitudes and practices, in relation to reform, like all other cultures have useful and less useful aspects. This section, with the experience of working in a MoE office, shows that capacity and its development do not start from zero. Nor is it linear. People, systems and countries have a variety of skill sets, some accepted as appropriate to the changing education

system, some not.

6.4   Knowledges transfer

The recognition that many existing knowledges are not deemed relevant to the
reform impelled me to investigate what is regarded as knowledges for reform and
who has the power to say so. This section discusses eight areas related to
knowledges transfer.

6.4.1 Knowledges transfer: the impetus to reform

I was interested in the ways actors in education reform construct the need for it.
People at all levels of the education system perceive the impetus for the reform as
coming from outside, although '*outside*' is constructed differently by different
actors in education reform. The comments by participants in ESWG meetings
recorded in Chapter Four suggest the participants saw the meetings as a foreign
artefact.

A provincial official in a translated interview saw the direction and need for reform
springing by the desire to emulate neighbours in ASEAN:

> Since we became a member of ASEAN, we have to adapt our education system
> to them, because we send our students to them for further education so we have
> to revise ourselves.

Thus the provincial official sees the impetus to reform coming from developments

outside the education system and outside the country. It should be noted that for most, being in touch with new ideas and wider world was seen as a benefit.

In addition, in friendly conversation with a high official, in English, I was able to ask the extent to which the government felt ownership of the donor aided reforms. I was told, *'It is better than it was. We are generally satisfied, but we do understand that the donors have to follow their own policies and their own ways of doing things'.* The comment *s*uggests that control is felt on the direction of reform activity.

6.4.2 Knowledges transfer: international knowledge transfer

International development in education relies heavily on the transfer of knowledges from place to place, country to country. There is a considerable body of literature which reflects on cross country borrowing, namely by commentators such as Beech (2006), Rappeleye (2006) and Philips and Schweisfurth (2003), whose views I have drawn upon in this chapter. However I turn first to Giddens. He argues that in a globalising world, people live in a '*society of infinite space*', that is the views of what is inside and outside become more complex, and do not stop at national borders, something which could be construed as accepting a knowledge as becoming globalised and therefore decontextualised. Beech (2006:10) identifies the process of knowledge transfer from country to country as, ideally, based in a process of looking for a best possible solution to in-country challenges. I suggest that this approach would imply a much greater process of reflection and evaluation than I was aware of in Lao PDR. Beech (2006:9) also

notes that knowledge transfer between countries is not an unproblematic process and may have unpredicted effects when implemented in new cultural contexts, something I have noted and illustrate below. With Beech, I do not contest the idea of borrowing of education practices. There is little likelihood, and little rationale for, the creation of a new set of education principles and practices devised for Lao PDR, but with Beech I ask the question, *'Is this the best we can do in these circumstances with these resources?'*, an insight which places the focus of reform on a realistic evaluation of what can be achieved rather than an ideal situation. Fairclough (2002: 3) basing his argument in that of Giddens (1990), takes a similar stance:

> In ... practical contexts discourses are evaluated not in terms of some 'absolute truth', but in terms of 'epistemic gain' – whether they yield knowledges which allow people to improve the way things are done.

Fairclough also promotes a view that educational change is brought about by the re-evaluation of existing knowledges rather than complete revision or replacement. I contrast this view with my perception that in Lao PDR education reform is based in *'new methods'* from imported and based in international norms. Beech (2006:10) reinforces this point when he suggests that *'a global educational discourse...implicitly defines a series of limitations for educational thought and action'.* The commentators Kingsbury, Remenyi, McKay, and Hunt (2004: 4) also note a worldwide tendency to rely on a *'largely off the shelf model handed down by donors, which is, in a real sense, not negotiable'*. I suggest that there is a reliance on international norms in education, bringing limitation to flexibility and

failure to look widely for appropriate solutions. The next section tests this perception.

6.4.3 Knowledges transfer: the processes and agents of transfer

My interest in the role and effectiveness of external technical assistance came up because of the many times it was discussed in the responses of the Ministry and donor agency officials, identifying it as an issue of some importance to the success of donor-supported interventions. Impact was normally constructed in negative terms.

In Chapter Five I noted the very high levels of external technical assistance included in planning documents and in this section I look at the reception and expectations of technical assistance. The use of external technical assistance is a major, though not only, strategy to bring about change. Other strategies include training overseas; higher degrees; study tours and to a much lesser degree, on the job training. These methods show considerable donor influence. Examples include a Swedish bilateral development agency which was influential in contracting a Swedish University to provide post graduate training to Government officials and an English contract holder whose consultants recommended a Quality Assurance system for teacher training on a model developed in UK. I doubt whether these solutions were the end product of a review of all possible alternatives.

I have known for some years that the words *'consultant'* and *'expert'* have a

negative connotation in Lao PDR and in other countries. Some years ago when this study was first coming together in my mind, I was told by a Ministry official, whose department had just hosted a mission from a planning team provided by a development bank which I remember as, '*We pay 18,000 USD a month and we have just had to rewrite the whole plan – the consultants know nothing about what works in Lao.*' The position is not particular to Lao PDR. I have found considerable distrust of external TA in a number of countries and international consultants generally have a poor reputation with donor recipients. The following is a view of external technical expertise expressed by education officials in an Arab country in receipt of development aid. An official of a Government National Council told me, in conversation during an evaluation consultancy undertaken in April 2009. I recorded this soon after as significant information for the evaluation:

> They (Technical Assistance Teams) don't listen to what we want. They just bring in something from somewhere else. We don't want something they developed in Vietnam or India; we want something designed for us, for our situation.

The international nature of knowledges was refuted and its contextual nature asserted. An interesting insight to the use of short term TA was provided in discussion in English by the project manager of a programme I was evaluating in Lao PDR in October 2009. The following was recorded as relevant to the consultancy. She begged me, '*Please don't recommend us to have any more TA. They only slow us down. By the time we have taught them the work it's time for them to go home*'.

The project manager is articulating a strong sense that the people in situ are the

ones that have the best understanding. This point was reinforced by a discussion with a Ministry official from an African country I met at a conference, in 2009. In friendly discussion generated by a session which included comment on capacity development, she mentioned her own resistance to technical assistance. I noted this comment soon after the conversation:

> You know I was very offended. We decided what was to be done but the donor said that I had to have help from technical assistance. I know my job and I knew I could do this but they insisted – and do you know they sent a 23 year old girl. Please say that in your thesis.

Her companion joined in and said, *'they say it (development aid) has changed, but not for us. It's much the same. We are pushed by technical assistants.'* The above comments chime with something told me in English by a Lao official of a donor agency in an interview, '*when we are looking at working with the Ministry too little attention is paid to the pride of people',* implying that development is not just about new technical skills, but it is done by people. The safe guarding of self regard is a moral issue. It is also practical. In Lao PDR it is essential if cooperation is to be gained, since cooperation is based in personal relationships.

I noted that Lao officials of donor agencies placed stress on the interpersonal aspects of donor aid, something almost entirely missing from interviews with international donor officials who placed emphasis on the practical aspects of implementation of donor aid. It may be that since Lao officials of donor agencies almost without exception, play roles lower down the administrative hierarchy, they

are more closely involved with implementation than strategy development e.g. face to face management of projects. The strategic role of international officials is privileged and the more personal and contextual knowledge of Lao officials given less value. It seems to me both represent important aspects of successful development.

From my own experience, I know the role of external consultant is not an easy role to fulfil. In particular one is locked into a contract which demands the implementation of certain actions, working to plans with specified outcomes and timescales, to achieve results that may have been identified up to ten years before. An international technical assistant told me in an interview for the study in English, of a tension he feels *'between supporting and doing'*; that is between transferring skills to officials of MoE and doing the work for them. He felt that there were differences in the perception and expectation of the role of TA between donors and the Government. The transfer of skills, he argued, demands a longer timescale and a different approach. He suggested that both donor agencies and Government have not sufficiently clarified the role of TA to themselves. He told me, '*They both just see the job to be done. It's like they see a straight line between input and output. Anyone in education knows it doesn't work like that.*' The consultant expresses a view very similar to that of Fairclough (2002:3) who says: '*The relationship between what is structurally possible and what actually happens between structures and events is a very complex one – there are intermediate organisational entities between structures and events'.*
A straight line is favoured because contracts are based and priced on specific

outcomes. A Lao official of a development bank made a related point, in discussing the value of technical assistance. In English, in interview, she suggested that, '*Donors assume that knowledge transfer always occurs';* with the implication that often it does not. Another Lao development bank official told me, in interview in English, of problems with the way work is planned. '*There is a tight timeframe. They (TA) must finish the ToR so they run after that'.* The implication here is that the transfer of knowledges gets relegated to second place behind hitting the targets, which are generally expressed as numbers of training courses implemented or schools built, which can be easily evaluated and which, contractually, must be met even when they have ceased to be appropriate. This relates to my own experience. In 2003, working in a fundamentalist Muslim country, I felt the pressure from the government, the donor and the employing contract holding company to complete the building of 245 teachers' hostels for female teachers, long after it became clear that for cultural reasons, related to the roles of women in society, the hostels would not be used to house female teachers. The building of hostels was an attempt to change the local culture, which was highly resistant.

Four respondents, two Lao officials of donor agencies, a national and an international TA consultant in interview, all laid stress on the constraint of tight time scales given to consultants. A Lao official of a development bank told me in English that consultants are '*driven by indicators*' and '*the pressure on all TA to maintain timescales is unrealistic*'. A further point was made by the national TA consultant. She reflected on difficulties in producing high quality work and spoke

in detail about the problems associated with the introduction of action research into Teacher Training Colleges. '*The international consultant has to teach the national consultant, who works with and trains the Master Trainers who work directly with the teacher educators, who then deliver to the students*'. Her argument was that during the many steps from intention to the end product the information becomes diluted and that the process leads to a low quality final product. Far from enhancing people's skills, she argued, teacher trainers are left to teach from a handbook they do not understand, a situation that positively disempowers them and reinforces the learning process as a passive endeavour, done by rote and without understanding. The Lao TA's solution was to '*slow the whole business down',* be more thorough and with less expectation at each level.

In Section 6.3, I flagged the need to explore the relationship between present methods of the transfer of knowledges and the development of capacity. In this subsection saw that learning from technical consultants is not always valued, largely because of a perceived lack of depth of contextual understanding and of contractual constraints to what they can do, leading to diluted and over simplified solutions. I go on to look at what is validated as knowledge and who has the power to say so.

6.4.4   Knowledges transfer: changing ideologies

In this section I explore the process of knowledges transmission and what constitutes knowledges. I start by arguing that systems generate the expertise

needed, that is administrators, teachers and others involved in education are in general skilled enough to perform their existing duties, the ones they were trained for and have developed experience in. There are of course varying abilities and commitment, but in general people's knowledges are honed to the needs of the system and to their own needs for survival in that system. Changes in administration systems, curriculum or teaching/learning methodology developed as aspects of education reform require a new and different skill set and are located in changed relations.

Change as experienced by the recipient relates often not only to new knowledges but to changed ideology. I illustrate the point by reflecting on my work in teacher training colleges in Lao PDR. The teachers' main role, until very recently, was to copy the text from the text book neatly onto the blackboard, for the children to copy into their note books. Teachers were judged by their blackboard writing, and their ability to stick to and complete a planned lesson in the allotted time. Children were required to sit passively and absorb the lesson, a view of education still dominant in Lao PDR, and based in a view that, if the teacher teaches properly, then the children must and should learn. In 1999, I observed a student teacher who was teaching a class in which one child crawled around the classroom, biting other children's ankles. The post lesson analysis between tutor and student made no reference to this, only to her ability to keep to the planned structure and timing. The approach is very far from the '*child-centred*', '*new*' or '*active learning*

methods[37,] currently promoted by the reform. A very different set of practical skills is required, but also a very different common sense understanding of the role of the child, of learning and of the relationship between the child and adult. This represents a change in ideology. A view of the child, built up over the years in western education systems, and based in a cumulative body of work, going back to referring the writings of Dewey (1916), Piaget (1974) Vygotsky (1987) and Bruner (1973), amongst a large number of other theorists, is to be implemented in Lao villages. Dewey in his work *Democracy and Education* (1916:25) sketches a model of education linked to preparation for citizenship in a democratic society, and in which he describes teaching as the redirection of children's existing skills, knowledge and understanding rather than imposition from outside. Thus a teaching/learning ideology, in much diluted form, is to be implemented in a very different society. How this comes about interests me and I next look at the role of external technical assistance.

6.4.5 Knowledges transfer: divergence of knowledges

In this subsection I look at what knowledges are sought and valued in TA recruitment. I look at the current processes of recruitment of technical assistants and show how they lead to a conservative and technocratic approach based in international norms, suggesting that the means of recruitment may work against the flexibility needed to improve the Lao education system. I look first at the position the international consultant takes in the social system in Lao PDR.

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[37] These are the English words most commonly used in describing the new teaching /learning methodologies in Lao PDR

The international consultant who works in Lao PDR finds herself in a social system which pays great respect to the holders of knowledge. In this way the consultant is addressed respectfully by the highest honorific, *Tan*. The title is applied to both male and female consultants, though men consultants outnumber women greatly. In my time of working in the Ministry I counted other international TA consultants. In a total of 10, two were women, myself and one from a Japanese INGO. One man was apparently in his late forties; the others were in their fifties and sixties, except for the one getting ready to celebrate his eightieth birthday. Vietnamese, Chinese and South Korean consultants are less visible, tending to meet at a higher level and to provide money or study tours rather than day to day input. In this situation the technical assistants supported by donor agencies come with a long history of expertise but more usually in contexts very to different from those in Lao PDR. In a highly patriarchal society, in which respect is given to older people and to educated people, consultants may command respect related to their sex, age and qualification rather than their ability to be effective in the particular situation of Lao PDR. In an informal conversation with a Lao friend who works in the ministry I was told laughingly, '*You know that sometimes we are so worried about the health and comfort of the consultants, the old ones, that we forget to make them do the work'.*

The tender process for the recruitment of technical assistant is designed to ensure transparency in a highly competitive situation which offers large monetary awards to the company selected to provide technical assistant consultants. The process is usually pre-selection by donor officials with three selected profiles offered to GoL.

The company is selected largely on the plausibility of their design in the intervention, as well as the CVs of their candidates. In the circumstance the candidate companies are unlikely to offer anything experimental or untried in other contexts or candidates that have not undertaken similar interventions before. This in itself encourages the replication of approaches that have been implemented before, possibly in very different societies and favours decontextualised solutions.

A donor representative from the head office of bilateral donor agency defended the high cost of technical assistance after my questioning it at a conference. She told me that the profits on each contract and the salary for consultants have to be large, because of the, '*intermittent nature of contract awards'.* Whatever the rationale, expensive technical assistance makes it imperative both for the GoL and donor agency to use expertise in the shortest possible time, a circumstance which inevitably favours simplified solutions and, more particularly, the import of pre-prepared solutions.

Through my research assistant, in interview in an MoE high official and his deputy, I asked officials about their preferred model of technical assistance. In answer to my question, '*What sort of technical assistants do you prefer to work with?*' The director answered after discussing the answer with his deputy. Three answers were given and prioritised. The first he offered was '*knowledge of the Lao situation'.* Further probing revealed this meant respect for the Lao ways of behaving and most particularly, enjoying being in Lao PDR and being comfortable with Lao people. The quality, '*mak muan'*, roughly translatable as having the

ability to enjoy oneself and have fun, is a highly prized quality in Lao PDR. The second quality put forward was the ability to communicate. When expanded, this referred to the ability to transmit ideas in a way they can be received and understood and delivered in way that avoids '*making us feel stupid*'. Only third came good technical skills. The overall view of good technical assistance was summed up by the deputy director as,' *People we can work with'.* The focus on personal and communication skills is in marked contrast to the TA recruitment process. For most donors the selection of TA consultant has been entirely by curriculum vitae (CV). Not only does this not test communication competence, it allows for manipulation in the selection and the presentation of technical skills. In 2010, the EC introduced the need to provide referees for each consultant. It is to be seen whether this improves the situation, as on the one hand it explores the success of previous mission undertaken by TA, but on the other hand it may make external expertise even more unwilling to take risks or to recommend the adaptation of inappropriate approaches.

'People we can work with' was to some extent echoed by a Lao donor bank official quoted who said, in interview in discussion in English, after articulating a view of the general failure of technical assistance to bring about the planned change, '*what we really need is someone who can work closely with Government, who is trusted by them and who can really communicate with them'.* By this she is proposing a model of TA not only with good technical skills, but with effective '*communicative competence'*, a phrase coined by Hymes (1966) in relation to children learning a second language, but which I would like to extend to mean the

communication skills needed by those working in a cross cultural and status driven system. Communicative competence in the context of this study proposes a model which requires both technical skills and the ability to communicate them. It also draws on Habermas' view of communicative action (1984a:297), which suggests that language and action are intrinsically linked and, for an utterance to be understood, it must be presented in a way that is acceptable to the listener.

The following example develops the point further. A Lao official of a donor agency, in interview in English, suggested that high level MoE officials do not always have the technical skills to analyse and digest information '*so they rely on an expert to do it for them*'. She went on to say that '*communication between Government and TA is not always good. The government makes poor use of the consultants. Sometimes they expect the consultant just to do it, whereas the TA needs guidance. The result is often not implementable in the country*'. I considered who, in Lao PDR, does monitor the suitability of the technical advice offered. An international official of a bilateral donor agency, in friendly conversation, confirmed the lack of specific educational knowledges amongst donor officials, something I have met in other places. She told me, '*You know I am a manager. I look after health and education. I don't have technical knowledge so I lean on the technical experts*'.

The information confirms the point made in the previous chapter that many technical aspects of education reform in Lao PDR are determined, almost by default, by technical assistant teams. Next I explore values and ideologies that

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underpin choices made by actors in education reform.

6.4.6 Transfer of knowledges: values

In this section I explore the value systems underlying the selection of knowledges. Commentators on change agree that education choices are inevitably underpinned by value systems and ideologies (Scott 2000a:11). Habermas, interpreted by Thomassen, (2010:102) suggests that change is inevitably value laden and Spivak (1993:68) makes a similar point when she refers to *'the constantly shifting and tangling network of techniques and knowledge and strategies of power through the question of value'*, indicating that power, control and values are firmly linked. The question then becomes, whose value system comes to be represented and how is the selection arrived at. Through the study I became increasingly aware that in education reform choices are located in value systems that are, in turn, related to ideologies.

I saw both donors and GoL drawing on foundational values, what Lyotard (esp 1984) has called the grand narratives, or meta-narratives. From the data collected for the study it is clear that being Lao and doing things the Lao way forms a grand narrative. Another is socialism, and yet another the regional role as a part of ASEAN. Donors' grand narratives include participation and democracy. Lyotard sees the danger of grand narratives as that they rely on reference to a pre-existing reality for justification rather than reflecting new realities needed in a changing situation. Said, back in1975, argued that such foundational narratives on

the part of donor agencies form a powerful means of maintaining colonial imposition and I suggest that in spite of the influence of the Paris Declaration, colonial imposition continues but more in indirect ways, one of which is through an unchallenged view that western ways of doing things are more valuable than non-western ones.

The Paris Declaration (2005) itself promotes the implementation of a relativistic discourse, by offering a less constrained and more open-ended relationship and leading to an approach which could be interpreted as '*let's work it out together'*. Yet in practice the discourse of education reform in Lao is underpinned by conflicting grand/meta-narratives that are not worked through and open discussion of them is avoided. The culture of Lao PDR demands avoidance of possible confrontation and differing ideological choices are not discussed in ESWG meetings, or elsewhere in public debate in government owned newspapers or television. In terms of immediate efficiency it may be realistic to avoid possible collision. However, avoidance of discussion leads to an unclear vision of the direction of the education system; is it the basis of a democratic change, or one aimed at producing a new generation of young socialists, or one aimed at economic development? I demonstrated in Chapter Four the Lao Government's attempts to locate change within existing parameters and below I show a donor's declared objective to support democratic change in Lao PDR. Some foundational discourses are open to inspection and can be found clearly in documentation, for example at subsection 4.3.2 of the EC Country Strategy (2007-2012) it is stated that '*Governance and human rights are an area of key*

importance for the democratic development of Lao PDR'. Other donor agendas are less open. Novelli (2009), first mentioned in Section 3.3.2, argues cogently that '*aid follows guns'*, a situation confirmed on July 2010[38] when the refocusing of large amounts of British aid to war torn Afghanistan was announced. Lao PDR is not strategically important and at the time of writing, and, as such, as noted in Chapter One, is not able to command sufficient donor funding to fulfil the agreed ESDF action plan.

GoL has publicly recognised the need for change, but is keen to limit the impact. The slow acceptance of the ESDF may be an example of Government nervousness in the face of change. One immediate impact of the donor's pressure for democracy is that the Lao government is turning more for support to its politically and culturally similar neighbours, something previously discussed in Chapter Two.

From the discussion in this subsection I reinforce the point previously made that failure to address the consequences of differing values and ideology creates a fuzzy approach to reform.

6.4.7 Knowledges transfer: education reform as technologically determined

In this section, I place the lens on a something previously noted, that is education reform as largely technologically determined and explore the concept in greater

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[38] Amongst other reports see Independent July 8 2010 and 21 Oct 2010

depth. In Section 5.3, I proposed the view of a technological approach creating a separation of knowledges from interpretation by those who receive and use those knowledges. I look at some commentators' views. Rondinelli as far back as 1983 argued that approaches to development are increasingly technocratic suggesting donors see a more technical approach as the means to maximise efficiency and control. Ramirez (1986), from his work in Costa Rica, offers a largely ethical critique of technological determinism in development when he says:

> Development cannot be reduced merely to technological matter. It involves a culture's identity, self confidence, important degrees of independence, the search for its own answers....an openness to the future, social and mental changes.

A similar view was offered by the director of an international INGO who suggested that the reform of education in Lao PDR was based in a technocratic approach when he told me in an interview, in English, '*we need a new rhetoric, a move away from the technocratic towards a more practical orientation*'. He opposes the technocratic to the practical.

In the passage below I show that it is almost, if not entirely, impossible to separate the technical from the affective, that is technical knowledges from cultural interpretation. To demonstrate the ways an apparently simple (to me) concept, '*a child of the village'* can be interpreted differently by people working with differing sets of pre-existing common sense assumptions. The village head had come to sit in on the interview with a village school head. The discussion took place in Lao and contains both translated passages and my reflection recorded in my field

notes:

I asked if all the children of the village are in school. The village head was confident in his reply that all are in school and this was confirmed by charts on the head teacher's wall. The village head told me of the process:

The teachers go to the house of parents who don't send their children. You know in this village all most parents are farmers. Mother and father go to their fields early in the morning and don't come back until night. Parents like to take their children with them. At first we try to persuade them to send their children to school. I can fine them if they still don't send them, but I also have a little money to help if they need to buy pens or notebooks. But sometimes the children don't want to go if they don't speak Lao, but now we have persuaded them all to come to school.

I asked about handicapped children in the village. The head teacher prompted him with information that there are three. The head teacher told me: '*One comes to school but the others cannot, one is deaf and cannot talk, the other has something wrong with his brain and cannot learn*'. In the same village I went to a small restaurant to eat noodle soup. The party was served by a young girl. I asked how old she was. She was eight years old. When asked if she goes to school she shook her head. Grandfather jumped in to tell us his son had died and they had taken on the child, so that she could help her grandparents in the restaurant.

I saw a construction different from my own of what a child of the village is. Children with severe handicaps and children who move from other villages fall outside the definition, forming a major problem for those trying to establish accurate data collection systems. This confirms Caddell's (2005) finding relating

to the necessity of respondents understanding the reason for a question or the expected outcome of an area of investigation.

Wilson (2002) makes a similar point when he rejects the common assumption that information and communication technology (ICT), the intervention perceived to be mostly technical, can be can be disassociated from its context:

> The commonly assumed model of ICTs and development is grounded in ... assumptions of technological determinism, which allow the complex political factors influencing poverty and inequality at local national and international levels to be hidden or at least to do largely unquestioned.

6.4.8 Knowledges transfer: misinterpretation of new knowledges

Beech (2006), quoted above, speaks of the unexpected consequences of transferring knowledges from country to country. Fairclough (2001:76) also notes that unintended consequences can be provoked by apparently '*common sense'* developments that seem to need no further justification. I argue that the misinterpretation is more common in situations in which new methods are distant from existing knowledges and to illustrate this I give the following example. In a classroom observation, I noted the teacher's handling of multi-grade teaching in a rural area after attending a nine day course. I give a longish account taken from my field notebook:

> The village head proudly showed me to a classroom. The classroom has been divided into two by a wooden wall, higher than an adult's head. Class Two, has eight children

and Class Three, nine children. Class Two sits on one side of the wall and Class Three on the other. Some children's desks are in very dark areas. The teacher's table goes across both classes and there are two black boards. From just one point the teacher can see both classes and the children cannot see children in the other class.

The teacher arrives a little late after lunch. She greets the children in Class Three but not Class Two and starts drawing from the text book onto blackboard number one. There is no introduction to the lesson. The children in Class Three had begun, before the teacher's arrival to draw the diagram from the text book into their own books. The drawing on the blackboard takes some 10 minutes. In the meantime the other class has waited patiently.

The teacher introduces the lesson to Class Three. It is a mapping exercise. The teacher explains that they have to match the name of a national holiday to the date. She does not check if the holidays are all known to the class or if children are aware of the calendar. Class Three now carries on copying from the blackboard and undertaking the mapping exercise while the teacher moves to Class Two's blackboard introduces their lesson. It is now some 18 minutes into the session.

I carried on watching Class Three. It was clear that one child had understood the exercise and that the others were used to asking him what to do. He described the way to map the lines from the National Day on one side to the date on the other, demonstrating which his finger. When the teacher returned children came out to the blackboard, one at a time taking turns to draw lines to match the date to the day. Two children did it confidently; six received considerable support from the teacher, one child could not understand and drew the lines randomly, until the teacher took the

chalk and did it herself.

I noted a number of things:

- The decision to split the classroom, making it dark for the children and blocking teacher and children's view of each other, must have been done in agreement between DEB, community representatives and the head teacher, representing a joint misunderstanding of the course content;

- The in-service course for multi-grade class teaching, promotes alternating attention to the two classes, something impossible in this set up. The situation dramatically reduces time on task and teachers' attention to each group;

- The course of five days also introduces '*child-centred methodology*' that is techniques for questioning, pair and group work and so on. These get overlooked in attention to the splitting of the classes

I see that the community had only assimilated one aspect of the training and speculate that the course trainer had referred metaphorically to dividing the room in two and that this had been taken literally. Other learning, especially the change in child-teacher relations has not been internalised, possibly because of little relationship to existing knowledges. The in-service training may in fact overestimate the difficulties involved in teaching 17 receptive and passively behaved children and in practice may have deskilled the teacher, by suggesting that she is now required to do something radically different from before. I argue that the course is too short to help teachers reflect on their existing practice, to identify what is already good and what needs to be changed.

Although not strictly related to the discussion here, I record my fascination at the children's strategies for dealing with what is in fact a difficult learning situation for most of them. They know how school works and start the lesson before the teacher arrives. They rely on the '*child who knows'* rather than the teacher to learn how to complete the task and engage with a task which apparently makes no sense to eight out of nine of them. I would argue that the approach empowers neither teacher nor children.

6.5 Three areas lacking in the discourse of education reform

In this section I focus three linked areas of significant interest generated by the chapter: the discourses of capacity as a scarce resource, absorptive capacity, and deficit models.

6.5.1 A discourse of incapacity and capacity as a scarce resource

A discourse of incapacity impacts on education reform in Lao PDR and as an important context, I followed Fairclough's advice and tried to locate where it comes from. The literature of development articulates capacity as a rare resource, see for example Chambers (2007:30) and Riddell (2008:207). The latter suggests that, *'Increasingly of the past 10 to 15 years, a now dominant conventional wisdom is that the weaknesses of institutions constitute one of the key clusters of impediments to sustainable growth'.*

Riddell goes on to suggest that capacity development is now seen as a '*good thing'* and that capacity building has become, '*the latest philosopher's stone of official aid agencies'*. The literature of development aid promotes a view of low capacity amongst those countries in need of development. I give as an example a passage from a report commissioned by the European Union (2008):

> The reasons why growth is held back are often also the main reasons why disbursing foreign assistance in these places is fraught with difficulty: weak state institutions or overbearing bureaucracies, few accountability mechanisms, pervasive corruption, lack of human capital, and so on. The countries that most need development assistance are often also those that are least able to cope with it.

All the negative attributes identified in the European Union report quoted above can and have be applied to Lao PDR. However, I demonstrated above that they do not tell the whole story. A discourse of incapacity takes power from its articulations. Each articulation constructs it and adds to its power. To test the interpretation of the term capacity development amongst development workers, I asked a group of some thirty development workers of differing nationalities, at a conference on development aid in 2009 which took place in English, the question, *why is development so concerned with capacity development?* The almost unanimous answer was, '*because capacity is lacking'*. However I do not see capacity development as inevitably related to incapacity, but an inevitable and appropriate response to the need for new knowledges when systems change.

6.5.2 Absorptive capacity

Absorptive capacity is a phrase normally used in the literature to indicate the limitations on a government's ability to use funds and initiatives efficiently and effectively, thus implying that there is a finite level of capacity development an underdeveloped country can undertake. Or it suggests that capacity levels are insufficient to make good use of funds (for example skills in planning, monitoring, EMIS etc). Rose (2007) relates absorptive capacity to factors such as labour market conditions, as well as technical, managerial and planning skills. Riddell (2008:227) sums up the common assumption in the following way:

> A large number of macroeconomic studies have shown that the more aid a recipient receives, the more likely it is that the additional amounts will be used less and less efficiently, with decreasing effectiveness.

However the term originated from business administration, in the work of Cohen and Levinthal (1990), based in a view that an organisation has to develop its absorptive capacity in order to support innovation. In this view absorptive capacity is not fixed but seen as a cumulative measure and one which must be attended to by seeing it as an inherent aspect of capacity development rather than a constraining factor.

In referring to the development of systems and individuals, it seems that absorptive capacity is greatest when new knowledges are related and built on prior knowledges, a prime pedagogic principle in schools, usually expressed as

'*starting where the learner is'*.

6.5.3 A deficit model

From the two discussions above, it occurs to me that currently in Lao PDR capacity development for education reform is based in a 'deficit model'. The deficit model has historically been used to describe children's failure within the education system, blaming failure on the child herself or her cultural milieu, rather than concentrating on the identifying of existing failures in the system (Valencia 1997: x, xi). Valencia quotes Black's (1966) development of the concept of '*cultural disadvantage'* and regards constructing a deficit model as tantamount to '*blaming the victim'*. This tendency transfers responsibility for the failure of aid to the recipient. A deficit model impacts on the education reform by the failure to recognise existing strengths, to fail to take into account the inadequacies in planning and implementation of capacity development activity and by transferring responsibility for failure to 'incapacity'.

MoE officials are aware of the negativity of the discourse of capacity as it applies to them, and resent it. A Lao project director became quite incensed during an evaluation meeting (April 2010), in discussion of the difficulty in implemented donor financial systems, '*They don't trust us, you know. They don't trust us. They don't think we can do things.*

The means to address a deficit model is to move the spotlight from the failures of

individuals or groups onto the characteristics of institutions and systems which provoke failure. I would suggest that this represents a normally unacknowledged issue of equal opportunity, in that it is based on a premise that some societies, cultures or people are inherently less able to accept professional development than others. The recognition of capacity as an equity issue would refocus analysis on the ways existing powers, structures and processes impact on individuals and groups.

6.6 The chapter's finding related to the questions posed in Section 6.2

In this section I reflect on the study's findings through the questions posed under the broad headings '*interpretation*' and '*explanation*,' which addresses questions to do with social determinants and ideologies.

Interpretation

In this subsection I relate the discourse of capacity development to other existing discourses and speculate on possible impacts. The discourse of capacity development is in fact a discourse of incapacity. I find it important to note that the negativity is constructed internationally and adopted and reconstructed in the discourse of donor aided education reform in Lao PDR. I speculate that its adoption leads to attempts to simplify knowledges, matched to a supposed level of 'incapacity'. Related to this is the employment of high level of external expertise.

An outcome is that explanations of failure and remedial actions are focused on the implementing individuals and groups, rather than in examination of constraints within contexts and levels of the system (Brinkerhoff 2010, Davies 2011). The search for simple explanations in a complex situation is anti-productive and leads to remedial actions reliant on '*more of the same'.*

Explanation

In this sub section I address the power relationships as revealed by the selection of knowledges, their means of transfer and the place of existing ideologies in the reform.

It has been shown that the term capacity development covers a very wide semantic space, in fact so wide as to appear that it can be used synonymously with development itself and loses meaning in its wide use. While the term may be useful as a signal of a generalised need for new knowledges, in practice its use avoids addressing the inherent complexity of interventions in a socially constructed institution.

The investigation of capacity development as a discourse allows it to be addressed as a social practice and invalidates the notion that education reform can be addressed as a purely technocratic venture.

The term 'capacity development' itself it carries negativity not found in equivalent

expressions, e.g. professional development, used in the education reform discourses in developed countries. There is considerable capacity within the education system but reform inevitably requires new and different knowledges. The chapter has raised issues about the differences in status given to existing knowledges and new knowledges and the lack of attempt to build from the old to the new. New knowledges are offered as technological advance. They gain status by linkage to international perspectives and hierarchical authority systems, a process which enhances the status of external knowledges.

The lack of attention given to contextual and ideological issues results in the implementation of largely '*off the peg models'*, an approach which discourages flexible approaches and the search for new and creative solutions. Closely related to this is the lack of a unifying vision of 'where we want to be', something caused, at least in part, by the failure to acknowledge the differing political, social and cultural ideologies of donors and 'recipients' and leading to the avoidance of contentious issues.

The term 'capacity development' is also used in a way which defines a power relationship between those who know and those who do not with the consequence that failure is located in the incapacity or unwillingness of individuals and groups, rather than failure to acknowledge mismatch with existing capacity, contexts and systems.

The process of selection of technical assistant consultants leads to conservative

practice relating to the implementation of international norms with insufficient attempt to adapt them to the Lao system. I speculate that some Lao policy makers and donor officials lack educational expertise, a situation which allows external technical assistance to exercise more control over the content of reform interventions than is acceptable or useful.

In the next chapter I continue the exploration of knowledges and capacity development and turn the lens on recipients' perceptions and responses to capacity development activities, with a focus on the ways and the extent that current capacity development activities offer the means to take agency and promote emancipation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NEW KNOWLEDGES AND AGENCY: THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL PROCESSES OF RECEIPT AND USE OF NEW KNOWLEDGES

7.0   Overview of the chapter

In order to further address the overall objective of the study, the responses to reform initiatives by teachers in rural schools, I continue the investigation of capacity development activity begun in the previous chapter, and look at the impact of capacity development activities on field officials' and teachers' interpretations of the development activities they have been exposed to. I am concerned to uncover the personal and social processes involved in receiving and using new knowledges.

I further develop the argument that capacity development activity is based in the transfer/receipt of new knowledges and that new knowledges are needed for successful education reform but, to bring about change, they must be offered and received in ways that support increased agency. I take agency to refer to actors' capacity to act independently, to make their own free choices and to work in potentially creative and innovative ways. I characterise agency, in education reform in Lao PDR, by Bruner's (1973) words, '*going beyond the information*

given' which implies applying new knowledges to the continuing development of practice rather than implementing a pre-formed set of skills and practices. Agency is related to structure and I build on the definition given by Fairclough (2003:23) who sees structures as very abstract entities, which define a set of possibilities. Social practices control selection from these possibilities and thereby allow or disallow agency. The study takes the position, following Fairclough (2003:224), that actions are the outcome of a tension between structures and agency. I characterise the reform as the attempt to change structures, and this chapter is concerned to explore the ways those affected by and implementing changed practices are able to take agency and the strategies they adopt to do so.

7.1 Means of inspection of data for the chapter

I explore the ways new knowledges are presented to and received by field officials and teachers. In Chapter Five, I explained that I use the word *knowledges* to cover a wide range of skills, knowledge information and practices associated with education reform. In this chapter, knowledges, in the main, are those administrative and teaching practices which have the specific intention of improving classroom practice.

The data analysed in this chapter was largely produced by classroom observations and semi structured interviews in the Lao language with teachers and administrators, recorded and translated by the research assistant. To contextualise the chapter's data, I give an overview of the content and delivery of

teachers' in-service courses. The body of the chapter is related to classroom observations and recipients' views of the training they have received followed by reflections on the research knowledge produced by the chapter.

Means of analysis

Following the previous chapter, this chapter is concerned with the ways classroom practice adapts in a context of new and existing ideologies and power structures, the ways capacity development activities provide structures which support or constrain change to teaching and learning practice in schools and the ways the new structures allow implementers to take agency over the '*new methods'*. The chapter therefore addresses the following questions, suggested by Fairclough's heading '*effects'*.

Effects: How does reform change or confirm existing social hierarchies? How do actors in education reform position themselves in relation to the new knowledges, what is adopted and what rejected? What agency are actors in education reform able to take and how does this impact on structural change as exemplified by common sense understanding of the teachers' role and the view of what a child is?

7.2   A brief overview of the content and delivery of teachers' in-service courses

In Lao PDR there is a clear sense that the best and most immediate way to improve learning is to strengthen the practice of teaching. In this way teachers find themselves in the forefront of the drive to improve schooling, a role which carries considerable expectation. United Nations organisations, bilateral donors, development banks and INGOs are all targeting the in-service training of teachers as an immediate strategy to raise children's achievement.

The difficulty in offering sufficient support to teachers to change existing teaching/learning practices should not be underestimated. Constraints include the remoteness of some villages and schools, poor infrastructure and the low base of teachers' initial education[39]. These factors make the in-service training difficult and expensive to implement; to monitor and to provide on-going support to teachers. Some teachers have received a short one off experience of in-service training while many have had none, as is demonstrated by the comments of a deputy director of MoE, in semi structured interview through translation. I quote his view of the problems the Ministry faces:

> There are still a lot of teachers who have no access to a training course. There
> are only 6,000 trained primary school teachers amongst the total number leaving
> 15,000 untrained. The project works[40] in 9 provinces and that means there are 8
> provinces untouched, with huge amounts of teachers who are untrained. In the

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[39] Many teachers will only have completed five years of primary schooling themselves.
[40] A teacher education project active in the rural areas I visited.

current situation there are 40% of the primary school teachers who have

graduated from 11+3 courses[41] teach lower secondary school and 40% of teacher

graduated from 8+3 program are teaching high school[42]. I would like to be able to

put in-service training into practice all over the country.

Thus many teachers have no access to in-service training and many teachers are

teaching a schooling grade they have not been trained for. However for this study

the focus is on primary school teachers who have received in-service training

supported by development agencies.

Models of in-service training

A number of models of teacher training are in practice. A Teacher Upgrading

course (TUP) gives teachers the opportunity to graduate from secondary school

with the purpose of extending teachers' academic and subject knowledge. Those

who have completed an 11 +3 qualification and are able to travel to the National

University of Lao (NUOL) can upgrade their qualification to a bachelor of

education degree (BEd) through summer courses. A BEd qualification allows

teaching in secondary school and teacher education college, but touches only

some 70-80 teachers a year.

In the areas in which I undertook field data collection, teachers are offered in-

service training through the following courses '*Do Talk and Record'*, '*Five Stars'*,

'*Active Learning'*, and multi-grade teaching. '*Do Talk and Record'* and '*Five Stars'*

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[41] 11+3 denotes completion of 11 years of schooling plus one year of teacher education.
[42] 8+3 means completion of Lower secondary school (eight years of schooling) plus three years of teacher education.

are in-service packages developed on behalf of the donor agency, used in a number of countries and implemented by INGOs. '*Active Learning'* with multi - grade teaching was developed in Lao PDR, through a project supported by a bi-lateral agency with considerable input of an international consultant. In interview in a rural area, I asked a DEO through translation how he handled the versions of teacher training implemented in his district. I was told, '*Basically they are much the same. They use different words and different activities but the philosophy and background is the same'*. I asked what they have in common and he answered. '*Child-centred, they are child-centred and about playing'*. After thinking a minute he expanded. '*The difference is in the techniques, some give debates, and role play, others do classroom decoration and pair learning, but they all do playing*.' His answer suggested that he sees the courses as a series of techniques, based loosely around '*playing*', rather than a coherent view of the child, teaching and learning or classroom practice. This confirms my view, after review of the content of the courses and discussion with trainers and teachers, that the content is condensed to a point where it becomes a series of techniques rather than extending the trainee's understanding of the process of teaching and learning. The actual content of the in-service courses becomes more clear through the discussions below.

Community development training

Active Learning programme had been undertaken by the teachers whose practice I observed. It was supported by in-service training for community members, under

the programme heading of '*community development'.* The training provided a week of training in the roles the roles and responsibilities of the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). The concept of VEDC was developed by a donor-supported project and enshrined in the Education Law (2007). The new VEDCs run alongside the previously existing Parent-Teachers' Association, which is made up of the heads of existing local committees[43]. The VEDC has the intention to increase participation of women and minority ethnic representatives. In the eight villages I visited the committees of VEDC and the Parent -Teachers Association were identical, thereby ratifying and extending existing village power structures and not extending the representation of minority ethnic members or women. On each of the committees on these villages, the sole woman representative was the local head to the Women's Union, already a prestigious post in the community.

To illustrate the impact of community development training, I include an illustration from a field visit to a rural school in which I was invited to walk round a primary school with a head of the VEDC committee, who was also the village head man. He told me he was checking classroom practice. I asked on what basis judged the classroom practice. He told me, through the interpreter, '*I check the lesson plan to see if the teacher is following it. I have the head teacher here to help me'*. The village head told me he saw his role mostly in the following areas:

- to maintain the school building and to raise money from the villagers for repairs and improvements;

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[43] These include the village head and deputy, police chief, the heads of the Youth Wing and Young Pioneers, representatives of the police, local security, and the Women's Union.

- to help poor children: the village head has the authority to raise a local tax that can be used to provide the things parents must contribute e.g. note books and pens;

- to make sure all the village children attend the primary school, though as was noted in the previous chapter, the definition of a village child can vary.

The role is similar to his previous role as head of the parent/teacher association, though with more emphasis on getting children to school. It is clearly easier to get children to start school than to complete the primary phase. Head teachers display class figures on the wall of the school office. A typical display from one school in the districts I visited showed 46 children starting Grade One, but dwindling to 7 children in Grade Five. The largest drop out is between Grades Two and Three.

7.3   Classroom observations

The purpose of the classroom observation was to support the semi structured interviews to derive some information about the personal and social impact of their exposure to teacher training and to gain illustrations of teachers' constructions of meaning related to their experience of education reform activity. Seven of the teachers observed had had in-service training in Active Learning, while one, observation of whom was discussed in the previous chapter, had received training multi-grade teaching. It must be clearly noted that I had no intention to measure what teachers did against some pre-formed notion of good practice, but to see what they had taken, understood and adopted from their

training, in fact, whether the training had impacted on their view of teaching and on themselves as teachers. These areas of investigation were supported by semi structured interviews.

The model of in-service training these teachers had received offers seven days of training, with three months during which they are supported by the professional assistant (PA) attached to the DEB with a further four days follow up programme. In both districts the seven day programme been implemented some 13 months previously, but follow up had not happened in either district, because of problems with donor disbursement of funds. PA follow up was practiced in each school I observed.

A question is raised about how representative the teacher's classroom behaviour could be when observed by outsider strangers. There are two relevant factors: it is common practice for DEB officials, head teachers and members of the VEDC to observe lessons and give feedback to the teacher. Also my previous experience of classroom observations, in a number of countries, suggests that teachers try to give their best performance in front of observers, and thus reveal what teachers have understood from their in-service training. As noted in Chapter Two, I implemented a number of actions to ameliorate the experience for the teacher.

Techniques and purpose of the classroom observations

There are a number of sources of advice on classroom observation, in particular

Delamont and Stubbs (1976) and Wragg (1999). Wragg (1999:3) stresses the importance of identifying a specific purpose of a research observation. It is not possible to identify change in classroom practice after in-service teacher training without close knowledge of previous practice. The purpose of the observation is therefore to describe existing classroom practice and to identify strengths and constraints in classroom practice in rural areas.

In Chapter Five I referred to the MoE checklist of 52 criteria for evaluating a school. The document is largely for the use of local administrators and criteria relate to all aspects of school including toilets, water systems and the ownership of name boards and flagpoles. In order to make the observations manageable I relied largely on five areas of classroom activity. The selection relies heavily on my previous experience as teacher and as someone knows Lao classrooms. From this experience I believe that these areas of children's and teachers' conduct reveal a teacher's approach to teaching and learning. These selected areas would indicate to a certain extent whether teachers had taken on board the notions of active learning and putting the child at the centre. While the research could not go as far as evaluating long term impact of reform on children's learning, one cannot assess the constructions of reality and complex choices of activity that teachers have without exploring how children are able to respond to these in the cultural context of the classroom.

Table Eight: Five criteria for analysing classroom practice

Area of investigation	Indicator
Behaviours of teachers	Positioning in the classroom and movement around it
	Use of blackboard and other classroom materials
	Styles of talking to children
Behaviours of children	Children's learning strategies
	Time on task

7.3.1 Three classrooms

I discuss three lessons in some detail and follow this with points derived from all eight lessons. The lessons are selected for more detailed discussion because the observed practice is in some ways typical and because they raise particular points for the discussion. The observations took place in eight villages, four in each of two districts. All were of Grade Three classrooms, with the youngest children eight to nine years old. However many children either start school late or repeat classes and the ESQAC research found an average age of 10.5 years in the rural areas of its study. In all cases the research assistant and I were accompanied to the school by a representative of DEB and sometimes the local PA. In all but two schools, the head of village joined the party. On my request, the observations were undertaken only by myself and the research assistant. The observations took place some four to five weeks after the schools had restarted after the three month summer holiday.

Classroom One: the World About Us

The lesson was from the *World About Us* curriculum, which has both scientific and social content. The particular lesson was '*Parts of a plant'*. There were seventeen children on roll in the class, of whom fourteen were present. The teacher stood by the desk. It was difficult for her to move away because her own baby was sleeping peacefully on a blanket on the desk**.** The teacher started the lesson by picking up the glass of water from her desk and using it to demonstrate something, putting her finger on the level of the water. The demonstration was very brief and both the research assistant and I missed the point. However I was interested in it as an example of the way simple everyday things can be used to demonstrate learning points, something seldom seen in Lao classrooms. The teacher read the lesson text from the text book, she then drew a plant on the blackboard, copying from the text book and asked the children to name the parts of the plant as she labelled them. The children answered in chorus. The children then worked individually on the class task, which was to copy the picture of the plant into their note books, and label its parts and copy the lesson's text from the text book.

Children were sitting in three groups, at good wooden tables and chairs provided by the donor assisted programme. Sitting in groups facilitated the sharing of text books, of which there were about one between three. Children did each have a note book each and a pencil. The plant could be copied from the blackboard, but the text book was needed for copying the text. The more dominant children in this classroom accessed the books with other children looking over, leaving one or

two children sitting passively, waiting to access a text book. One child attempted the difficult task of copying from the text book which was upside down to her. After the lesson, with the head teacher, I queried the shortage of text books and found that a number of replacement copies were supplied irregularly by MoE, but had not yet arrived. I was shown that the children all had the Lao Language text book. An MoE official told me there had been hold ups in printing. The disadvantage of sitting in groups was that when the teacher talked or demonstrated on the blackboard some children had to screw their necks round to see.

When the teacher started the reinforcement activity, about half of the children had not finished the task. Children volunteered to come to the blackboard to identify the parts of a plant. Each of the five who volunteered got it right and received a round of applause. It may be that only the more competent children offered to undertake the task, or they were selected because of the observing party.

The classroom atmosphere was good, the teacher using pleasant and encouraging words to speak to the children, and I observed all the children working or trying to work on the task. The teacher spoke very loudly. This is a characteristic I have noted in a number of Lao teachers. After the lesson I gently asked one why. She giggled and said, *'we have to make sure all the children hear'.* Since loud teacher talk is common in Lao classrooms, I interpret the behaviour as a marker of teachers' authority.

The lesson took place in a rural village in which children have vast experience of plants. A child's task from a very early age is to help to tend the family's vegetable

patch. The teacher failed to draw on the children's and her own wealth of existing knowledge or to provide an appropriate teaching aid, in this case a plant. The teachers' handbook does offer extension activities, which include children looking at a plant, but this was not done. The acquisition and use of teaching aids was an important topic brought up by teachers and is discussed further below.

The teacher stood by the blackboard or sat at the teacher's desk and there was no interaction with individual children except when they came to the blackboard. The children in this class were focused on the task, though those without direct access to the text book did not complete the task. A brief look at children's note books showed that some children regularly failed to complete their tasks.

Lesson two: reading lesson

In this classroom the furniture was old and mismatched and the classroom had woven walls and a beaten earth floor, with folded paper decoration strung across the classroom and three posters on the walls. Sixteen children were sitting in four groups and the teacher sat at her desk or stood by the blackboard. There were text books for each child. The teacher wrote the name and number of the lesson on the blackboard and copied the six lines to be read, taking some seven to eight minutes. The teacher read it out in short phrases and the children chanted after her, in unison. The children were then asked to read in pairs and threes. Not all the children were following accurately. The research assistant indicated that their fingers were not on the correct part of the text. The teacher did not move round to

check who was following, but there was considerable collaboration amongst the children. I saw one child helping the children on either side of him by pointing to the right place in their text books, while another was holding her friend's finger to keep it in the right place. The Lao language is written in syllables and presented in long phrases rather than individual words and children can find it difficult to match meaning to symbol. The teacher did not discuss the meaning of the text. After paired reading the children volunteered to read the text from the board. In this room not all the children were fluent and made mistakes. The teacher was encouraging, suggesting they tried again and offering the sound of the letter and supplying the word if the child could not do so. The children then copied the text into their note books, most using the text book rather than the black board. Very few had finished before the end of the lesson.

The reading was chanted in a sing song way. I noted that the same way of reading amongst children whose reading was recorded for the Education Sector Quality Assurance Centre (ESQAC) of MoE suggesting this is a normal action. There was value in sitting in groups as it enabled children's support for each other. I noted again as in the previous chapter the children's reliance on *'the child who knows'*, indicative of a collaborative approach to learning. The teaching approach relied largely on repetition.

My main findings are the poor use of children's time and low expectation. The time taken to write the text on the blackboard, when the children had access to the text book may be a teaching strategy developed in a time when few text books

were available. One paragraph seems a low target for eight to eleven year olds, although not all children addressed the text confidently. Some six children were not stretched by the text and were able to read fluently, seven were coping using phonic skills with support from friends, while three had few skills to address the text. Lack of success in school learning is a major cause of school dropout, which is very high in rural Lao PDR.

This classroom stood out because of the teacher's interaction with the children. The room was not set in groups but the twelve children sat three to a desk. The lesson was subtraction for numbers over ten. The teacher copied examples from the textbook onto the black board and explained the subtraction method. While the children wrote and solved the sums in their notebooks, the teacher went to each of the four tables, bent over and discussed the task with the children. There was obvious interaction and the children were apparently initiating discussion with the teacher and asking questions about the task. I saw the teacher encourage a child to use small strokes at the side of the page as counting objects. There was also considerable interaction between children, apparently checking answers or offering advice. The individual, desk based exercises were completed by all and, in follow up, the teacher invited individual children to the blackboard, to make up a sum for classmates to solve. In this way the black board was used to provide new and genuinely extending experience. The children were all on task and this was the most lively of the classes I observed. I note that this classroom modelled teaching possible and doable in low resourced classrooms as it did not require large extra investment in resources but was based in known methods and reliant

on teacher's skill and confidence in curriculum knowledge.

I go on to make general points related to the criteria identified above in Table Eight in relation to the eight classrooms observed.

7.3.2 Comments arising from classroom observations: the teachers

Lesson three: mathematics lesson

In the next two subsections I bring together my reflections on the classroom observations starting with a focus on the teachers.

Positioning of teachers in the classroom and movement around it

Traditionally in Lao PDR teachers stand at the blackboard, or sit at the teacher's table nearby. This defines a particular style of teaching based in an established teacher/child relationship, giving the teacher authority over both the classroom space and the knowledge. Of the eight teachers observed two moved around the class and interacted with children at their desk/tables. As well as the teacher of the mathematics lesson, a teacher in a World About Us lesson walked to the back of the room and looked at some children's books, pointing out some things needing correction, but without bending over or undertaking prolonged interaction, thus maintaining an authoritarian role. Six teachers moved only between the blackboard and the teacher's desk. These teachers all taught from the front and

asked for children to come forward individually or in twos to complete a task on the blackboard. They asked questions of the whole group, in almost all circumstances children answered in chorus. In seven of the eight classrooms I saw no example of a child initiating dialogue and the children fulfilled a very traditional role in responding interactions started by the teacher, normally in chorus.

Five teachers were female. Three of them had their own child in the classroom. One baby was in a sling round the teachers' neck and one, previously mentioned, was sleeping peacefully on the teacher's desk. A toddler needed more attention, running round the classroom and moving the pupils' pens and books. I noted that children, both boys and girls sitting in the front row, gave the toddler considerable time and attention and had a variety of techniques for keeping a toddler occupied. These included teaching the toddler to click his fingers, hiding something for the toddler to find and making a ball from a piece of paper, torn from a note book. I noted this particularly because in effect the children demonstrated techniques for creating simple activities with available materials, a skill apparently forgotten by teachers.

The arrangement of classroom furniture

In five classrooms children sat in groups, even when the furniture was unsuitable. In one classroom benches were turned on the side and the children sat on the very narrow edge, as in the upright position, they were far too tall for the tables at

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which they were grouped.

I am fairly sure that, in three classrooms, the children had been hurriedly put into groups because my party was there, suggesting the teachers wanted to be seen working with groups and identified it as an important part of their new learning. I saw no group work taking place, however the formation of groups did facilitate collaborative work. The practice of sitting children in groups but teaching from the blackboard , with a quarter of the children's backs to the teacher, is not confined to Lao PDR, but is something I have seen in a number of countries in which reform is supported by donor aid.

Use of black board and other classroom materials

The blackboard is the main teaching aid. There were few teaching aids in the classrooms; just one classroom had fabric pouches, containing about twenty books, but classrooms do not normally have cupboards and the few materials are kept in the head teacher's room. In only one classroom did I see the blackboard exploited for more than just copying.

In three classrooms the boards were chalky reducing visibility of writing because of poor contrast. I suggest that an improved learning experience for children could be brought about simply by improved use of a blackboard, an action closely associated with existing experience and reliant on an already available material in most, though not all, rural schools.

Classroom decoration

Moves to make classrooms attractive are a focus of in-service training. The teachers in one of the schools in which I undertook observations told me, through translation, this *'attracts the children'* and '*makes them want to come to school'*. In four of the classrooms I observed children's pictures displayed on the walls, stuck haphazardly directly to the walls with rice water paste. One classroom had no walls. A teacher proudly showed us the way he was covering the walls; he had nearly got from the top to the bottom of one wall of the classroom. The paper for the drawings was all cases torn from the children's notebooks and normally done with the child's writing pen. The proud teacher's classroom was a part of a newly built school, an aspect of a donor-supported programme, with plastered walls newly painted cream. The pasting of pictures on walls links to the decoration of village houses, in which any pictures available are pasted onto the woven bamboo walls for decoration. Five classrooms had paper decorations made from recycled paper strung across the ceilings. In all these classrooms the decorations were dusty and tired looking and in two a string had detached itself and was hanging down, not having been changed in over a year.

The practice of pasting children's pictures on the walls does give the message that all children's contributions are welcomed. However the drawings peel off fairly quickly and all classrooms using this technique had to a greater or lesser extent peeling pictures and in the newly built classrooms, the pictures were pulling the paint off the walls and generally causing an untidy appearance. It seems the

messages have been received about the importance of giving value to children's work by displaying it but the practicalities have not been addressed. Undoubtedly the children were excited when they first saw the decorated classrooms and had their pictures displayed on the walls, but the need for continuing use and maintenance was not understood.

Styles of talking to children

Children are addressed politely, girls addressed as 'Nang Sujita, Miss Sujita, and boys as Nong Somboon, Master Somboon. Loud speaking amongst teachers was noted, but I did not see children shouted at or humiliated. For the ESQAC study children reported ear pulling as a punishment, but, in the classrooms observed, none of the children showed anything but confidence in their teacher.

The downside of the mode of communication is that it is impersonal and creates a gap between teacher and child. Children are normally spoken to en masse and reply in chorus and little attention given to the individual learning needs of children, even though the classes in rural Lao PDR are normally small.

7.3.3 Comments arising from classroom observations: the children

In this subsection I pull together my reflections on the classroom observations with a focus on the children.

Attention to the task

In all but one classroom the children gave good attention to the task in hand. In the other classroom, children were distracted by smoke and flames generated by the burning hillsides, an aspect of slash and burn cultivation. The classroom was made very dark by the smoke, making it difficult to see the blackboard. As soon as they were released from the classroom, the children excitedly chased the floating black flakes as children in UK play catching snowflakes.

Children's learning strategies

The children took considerable responsibility for learning. They continued working when the teacher was not there, and cooperated with other children. The '*child who knows*' played an important role in all the classrooms I observed. One or two children clearly had a greater understanding of the lesson. These children were better dressed than other children, and wore shoes rather than the usual flip flops or bare feet. This suggests an important class dimension to Lao school achievement, although I am not familiar with means of measurement in a socialist society. I do, however, identify it as an important area for further investigation.

I also noted considerable expertise in school behaviours. In one classroom I saw a boy of about nine years old who slid quietly into the class a few minutes late for the afternoon session. He was dusty, presumably from playing in the lunch break. He put his hand onto the ledge under his desk and pulled out a white shirt. As

inconspicuously as possible he put on the shirt over the grubby tee shirt and immediately changed his whole demeanour, by sitting up very straight, folding his arms and giving his full attention to the teacher. Interestingly the teacher made no comment on his late arrival. This made me reflect on knowing how to be a school child is an important skill in school learning.

Children's reported difficulties

For the ESQAC study children were asked what they found difficult in the curriculum. The following is quoted from my note book, written during the field study for the ESQAC research and shows a curriculum problem faced by children:

> A MoE official asked the children if they found any difficulties in the curriculum. A girl opened her text book and showed a lesson she had worked on that day. She asked why the picture had straight lines and dotted lines. The picture was of a cube, with the hidden faces indicated by dotted lines, a common convention but no one known to the children and possibly not to the teacher. The official wanted to explain, but found he could not do so without a cube to demonstrate. We searched around and found a box of chalk, which he used to demonstrate the faces that can be seen and those that can't, but we know are there and that they are indicated by dotted lines.

A number of things were of interest in this interaction. They included the children's willingness to identify and discuss a difficulty and that a conventional term had not been explained, possibly because the teacher did not know. The MoE official found he needed something with which to demonstrate his explanation. As I noted

in my comments on lesson one, the use of objects for simple demonstration is rarely done in Lao classrooms. Through interview in Lao, told me they see materials as a means 'to *attract children's attention,* 'or *'to help them learn new words and numbers,'* rather than as a means to explain a difficult point. Another point of interest was the difficulty in finding a cube around the school. Lao schools and Lao villages have very few objects.

A further observation derived from taking part in the ESQAC research was the difficulty children find in moving away from mechanical use of the text book. I include this observation made during the field work for the ESQAC research.

> The Lao language text book gives an example and asks the learner to follow the model and to construct her own letter. A member of the ministry research party got interested in the lesson and discussed it with a group of children, explaining that they should make up their own letter. They copied the letter from the text book into their notebooks. He went over it again and suggested they write to him, giving his name and suggestions for content. The children went away and again copied the letter from the book. He was confused, having felt the instructions were clear and but he had not succeeded in moving the children away from the given text.

As an aspect of the ESQAC research, there was a requirement for teachers to complete the same test paper as the children and a strong correlation between teachers' mistakes and those of the children in their classes was noted. The requirement to teach what they do not know themselves is a powerful factor reducing teacher's agency, which in turn, causes dependence on the text book

and rote learning. Greater agency may be achieved by supporting teachers to greater understanding of the curriculum.

7.3.4   Some findings from classroom observations

A slow pace of learning and low expectation is noted. Copying lessons onto the blackboard and repeating the same exercise many times all limit lesson content. Four teachers, in translated semi structured interviews, separately told me of difficulty in completing the curriculum. One told me, *'Every year I rush to complete the curriculum. I don't have time for other activities'.* The teachers, probably unknowingly, are expressing an ideology of teaching/learning, that learning takes place through repeated exposure.

Classroom practice, even after in-service training is strongly influenced by a traditional view of what a teacher is and what a child is. Classroom methodologies refer to an existing political and cultural ideology. I mention the impact of political ideology, here, because the socialist philosophy as practiced in Lao PDR encourages obedience and conformity. The ideology is held in common by DEB officials, head teachers and teachers alike and therefore existing structures are resistant to change. Current in-service training practice provides neither sufficient support to changed practice nor offers a clear rationale for why, other than the stamp of the authority, it is better. In this circumstance taking agency is severely limited.

From the observations I was aware that a number of practices could improve schooling of the rural child, without resort to changed and 'foreign' ideologies or unavailable teaching/learning materials. These would include:

- alerting teachers to the value of moving to the child's desk as a means to improve communication between teacher and child;

- cleaning blackboards;

- simple techniques for using the blackboard as a more exciting learning aid;

- support to teachers' understanding of curriculum content;

- how to use available things to demonstrate a difficult concept; and

- more time given to teaching.

7.4   The ethnic minority child

In this section I look at the situation of the child of a minority ethnic community who finds a new language and culture at school. The objective of the study places focus on how reform appears to be played out and understood in the rural context and by the teachers and children there. While many of the issues discussed here impact on the education of all rural children, the schooling of minority ethnic children may be further impacted by geographical isolation, lack of teachers and unfamiliarity with the Lao language. The question is whether current reform efforts in the training of teachers will address such issues. Previous projects have tackled the situation by training potential teachers from minority ethnic communities. The strategy is hindered by the low level of education opportunities in very rural areas, leaving pupils without entry qualifications to teacher training college. A further

attempt was made to provide teenagers opportunity to upgrade their education and go on to teacher training, a five year programme which proved too expensive when donor support ended. Equally the expectation that the trained teachers would return to their villages proved erroneous, since the students had become used to the better services of the urban area. A major problem in Lao PDR is to get teachers to live in villages with poor facilities. The situation was brought home to me through a recommendation I made to a teacher training project to send trainee teachers to remote areas for teaching practice, in the hope they would return to teach there. During the field study I met twenty or so, who were enjoying the experience, but not one intended to return there to teach. One told me, in part English and part Lao, '*I have to go home to my family and friends*, and after a short pause, '*and electricity and the internet*'.

Donor policy is focussed on persuading the government to change its linguistic policy and allow mother tongue teaching. However even with Government permission, the numbers of languages, multiple materials needed and the cost of training teachers, the action represents a long term solution. A shorter term solution may be to build on teachers' existing skills and understandings to develop ways to work with children from a different language background.

A visit to a Khmu village

I visited a Khmu village for an organisation that has given permission to use the following material, as did the villagers, though as noted in Chapter Two, the reality

of their understanding of the request is difficult to judge. I was able to talk to a group of some twenty parents. The village had recently been relocated, from their highland home to a lowland location. A mother told me, through two translators (Khmu- Lao-English):

> We have just come here. We used to live on the mountain and they moved us here. We had no school. None of us went to school. Now the children have the chance for a good education.

The visit to this village highlighted something relevant to all the schools I visited, the numbers of the children who are first generation school attendees. A father who had twin girls on his lap told me through two translators, *'I am pleased that they come to school and they like it'*. I asked of there were language difficulties, he answered, '*They are learning Lao now'*. In researching first generation attendance at school I found much literature from developed countries on first generation entry to higher education institutes (Thomas, Thomas and Quinn 2007) and the experience of first generation immigrants (Chan 1999), but less on the needs for first generation learners in developing countries. I noted the attention parents gave to children's manners. A number of respondents valued children's learning of society's norms. To illustrate this I record what a mother, though two translators told me, '*Since the teachers went to training, the children are more polite now. They know how to talk to parents and grandparents.*

Another told me '*they can wai[44] properly'*. Manners constitute a social skill highly valued by parents, even though the manners are Lao rather than from Khmu culture, suggesting that the parents aspire for their children to gain the skills to fit

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[44] The two handed greeting of the lowland Lao that was banned after the revolution, but is now reinstated.

into the wider Lao society.

Parents projected a poor vision of themselves in relation to education, saying that they could not support the children, because, as one mother put it, '*we are just illiterate people'*. Ways to make parents and community members aware of the power of their role as first educators of their children may be included in community development activities. The investigation of the impact on a society accessing schooling for the first time is not possible within the resources of this study but is an area worthy of further study.

An interesting piece of agency has been developed by young children in this village. They refuse to go to school if they are not given a small amount of money to buy treats, a very new attitude in the village.

7.5   Implementers' comments on capacity development activities

I explored with recipients their views of the training they have received in order to match this against their observed behaviours and against the demands of inclusive teaching, as indicated in the discussion of ethnic minority children above.

Increased status and enthusiasm

Discussion with teachers in interview through an interpreter showed that in-service training has had an important impact on the status and enthusiasm of

teachers. The interviewed teachers without exception perceived their retraining courses to be valuable and good. Teachers' comments which illustrate this are '*being in touch with modern methods*'; '*getting new ideas'; 'being able to upgrade myself*' and '*learning something new*'. The courses are held at the district centre, or at a regional training centre. Rural teachers reported pleasure at travelling outside the village. One told me, '*I don't have much opportunity to go outside my village, so it was good to meet other teachers*', and another, '*At the course I meet my friend, Sith, who I went to college with five years ago.*' The participants receive a small per diem, which is a welcome monetary addition to a low salary. The very fact of training has an important effect on teachers' professional self image. A rural teacher told me, '*Now I am able to talk to the parents and to the parents' committee*'.

The content and effectiveness of the courses

With teachers I explored their views on the content and effectiveness of the courses. In interview through translation, I asked a teacher in a rural area, whose classroom I have observed, but not commented on in detail, about the in-service course in teaching methodology course she had attended. She told me:

> I enjoyed the course. It was very good to meet other teachers and have professional upgrading, but some of the techniques are difficult. I tried to conduct debates like they showed me, but the children could not do it. They are very rural children here.

The teacher articulated her pleasure in the course, but displayed a negative view of rural children, expressing a belief that they are inevitably less teachable than town children. What is missed is the understanding that children who are not normally encouraged to speak up in front of adults take time to adjust to very 'foreign' demands.

Three teachers from one rural school were interviewed together, through an interpreter. I observed one of these teachers giving the reading lesson described above. They all had training in inclusive education (IE) supported by an INGO, and Active Learning. Asked to reflect on the experience of training one of the teachers told me, '*They are all good but IE was easier to understand, because the facilitators had more visual aids'*.

She appreciated the value of visual aids, but her colleague, quoted below, articulated the difficulty in making them and using them with children. Another of the group told me:

> I enjoyed the courses. It was very good to meet other teachers and have professional upgrading. I like the new way of working but some of the techniques in Active Learning are difficult. I tried to do role play but the children could not do it and it takes time to make visual aids, and I don't have materials. Some of the techniques, pair reading and story writing take time and we have to run to finish the curriculum.

She articulated something noted previously, that 'modern methods' are perceived

as slow learning. I was also interested in the use of the technical word 'visual aid'. I checked with the research assistant that a technical equivalent in Lao was used. The word has entered the teacher's technical vocabulary, but, after these discussions I see that the notions of visual aids and teaching/learning materials have become reified and constructed as the things that bring about learning, rather than tools that a teacher uses knowledgeably.

Following my concern for the pace of learning, I looked to see if I could find references to raising the pace of learning in documents in Lao PDR but came across none, in either policy or programme documents. However I did come across the point in the guidelines for the English National Curriculum[45], in which pace is described as carrying not only the notion of slow speed but also to low expectation. Low expectation is a further manifestation of a discourse of lack of capacity, with resultant devaluing of rural children.

The third teacher in the group of three told me of her difficulties in the training course, giggling which usually signifies embarrassment in Lao PDR. '*I found the words they used in the maths training very difficult. I didn't understand what they meant'*. I asked if she had asked for them to be explained. She giggled again and answered, *'But if you don't understand the maths you don't understand what they (the facilitators) say'.*

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[45] A Condensed Key Stage 3: Supplementary Guidance - Science

7.5.1 Teachers' views of ways to improve their teaching

I explored with the three teachers in semi structured interview through translation what would make their teaching better and easier: The list was agreed between them:

- more teaching/learning materials, which they identified as paper, pens and pictures;
- better understanding of the curriculum, in particular some maths problems and some words of the Lao Language curriculum;
- visits to schools where they were implementing the new methods well;
- more training on the new methods.

The list is representative of those given by a number of teachers, almost all starting with the need for '*more materials*'. I suggest that a by product of the in-service training is the equation of new methods with increased use of teaching/learning materials. However as noted above, the view of materials is narrow and focused on external things such as card, coloured pens and teaching games, rather than a view of the things that can be used to help children learn e.g. plants and cubes. In a visit other than for the study, I saw a school which was lavishly equipped by an INGO. The teacher opened her cupboard, also supplied by the INGO, and I saw a stock of cardboard, paper and coloured pens almost untouched throughout the year. I was told that materials become very precious and that there is a fear that they will not be replaced, so they are kept with care and used sparingly. This may be an indication that the provision of more materials

itself does not in itself change practice.

Lack of coherence in training courses

In interview through translation the head teacher of the same school told me of
the courses he and his teachers had attended:

> I attended an administration and management course, also Active Learning and
> school sanitation. One teacher attended a reading promotion, some teachers
> attended AIDs, under Population Education and Worm Protection for Health
> Education (from Unicef) and four teachers here attended the TUP programme.

The range of courses indicates the expertise expected of a school, with donors
identifying schools as a channel for messages to the community. The lack of
coherence is noted in areas covered and, in particular, that many are not related
to analysis of the needs or purposes of the school. A United Nations organisation
in 2010 has been proactive in reviewing existing in-service courses and
recommending a progressive system with a recognised qualification at each level,
but I understand the work has gone no further, possibly because it is an enormous
task.

Cultural coherence between home and school

Currently Lao children in Lao speaking villages attend schools which are closely
located in the community and represent continuity between home and school with

consistent expectations of behaviour and respect systems and many children have skills of collaboration and cooperation which they employ in their learning. The school, community and cultural expectation by the teacher sets what 'being a school child' is. In most classrooms, this is limited to following the teacher's direction. On the positive side, children who do want to learn can find their own space to do it. It is noticeable that some children can apparently work with little attention to the teacher, teaching themselves directly from the text book or from another child.

Cultural coherence is less so for the minority ethnic child, who meets a different language, cultural expectations and politeness systems, from the teacher, who is likely to be from a Lao background. This question of coherence and inclusion did not appear to be covered in the training courses, nor was mentioned as a gap by the teachers.

My overall impression was that schools are places in which learning can take place. In the schools I visited, teachers come to class, and children come to learn, although the numbers who stay to complete the primary phase or even stay long enough to become literate is relatively small. Children's failure to persist in school is rooted in a number of social and economic factors, however, low formal achievement with the repetition of grades all work against persistence in schooling. Current strategies to address achievement are not as effective as they could or should be.

7.6　Perception from the field of incapacity of central officials

Here I change the perspective to record the views of field officials towards central officials. The existing knowledges of these DEB officials was previously noted in this chapter. A DEB official, in interview through translation, sketched a situation in which those driving change are ill informed about the situation they are working for:

> Developers should get experience of implementing their area of curriculum as well as the area they are in charge of. They should have experience of teaching and know how to balance it with Lao children's knowledge area. They should not compare it to international level since Lao children's education is not at such a high standard yet. The curriculum needs not to be too high, now it is as high as ASEAN counties. Do not only look at the curriculum - look at the teachers.

Thus the DEB official sees the reform driven by a desire for a currently unrealistic education standard, motivated by the desire to emulate neighbours. However, by expressing, *'Lao children's education is not at such a high standard yet' (my emphasis)* he expresses confidence that they will, in time, reach the international standard. This relates to Giddens' (1994:198) view that '*time is associated with social change'*. Thus the issue is not whether Lao schools can change or reach an international standard but whether the current approach is the most appropriate to achieve that change.

The official argued that curriculum designers are not sufficiently expert nor in

touch with the contexts in which changed practices are implemented. He also reflected on the adjustment and support needed to move from one way of working to another and told me:

> The children are used to finding the answers in the book. It is a new way of working that has not existed in Lao so far and nobody has seen how to use it.

He went on to comment on the teachers' ways of working:

> Teachers work mechanically. The Government can say, be more flexible, be more creative, but takes time to make those adjustments and some cannot do it.

It may be useful to add that this district official is very committed to his schools and to new ways of working. The following extract from my field notes illustrates his willingness to step outside the normal Lao politeness to improve the schools in his area. I met him in the district office and later he accompanied me to school. I wrote the following in my notebook soon after the incident.

> The DEB official showed great interest in the jigsaws of the provinces of Lao which I had taken as gifts to the schools. He spent time with the head teacher working out how to complete the jigsaw. He told me he would like at least one for each school in his district. We went on to another district. On our way back the road passes through district centre near the DEB office. He was waiting for us and flagged down the car. He asked for more of the jigsaws. This is almost unknown behaviour in Lao, where to ask directly is almost taboo. I put his willingness to step outside the norms of politeness to a strong desire to improve schools in his area[46].

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[46] Since there is no post office or other regular carriage service a means to send them had to be devised. This involved taking them to the head office of a project working nearby and asking them to send them the next time their car went to the area. The DEB was asked to collect them from the project site.

A DEB official in another rural district identified the specific difficulties teachers in his district faced:

> In the new way, after the lesson the children have to write dictation. They cannot read the text but have to write dictation. What's the point of that?

and

> Teaching the Lao language is now by integrating four skills which are listening, talking, reading, writing and this is new to teachers. If they have access to the training course how to deliver the integrated approach they may be able to do it, but now none of us know, so how can we help them?

and

> Maths is too high for the teachers. They are not prepared for it.

Again I was impressed with the knowledge the DEB official holds of classroom practice in the district and his analysis of what is needed. Interestingly he does not relate failure to incapacity of teachers and administrators but to lack of training courses and poor preparation of teachers. The following are suggestions for the way forward:

> The curriculum needs to be compiled by foreigners and Lao together and gradually move forward...actually there are many ways to do maths, don't limit the children to one way of solving problems.

The official makes the case for external expertise, but with close linkage to Lao knowledges. He sees the change as something that should be gradual and wants a more open ended approach. Underlying the above comments from both DEB

officials, there is a perception that the interventions lack grounding in the reality of Lao rural schools and are proposed by developers with little understanding of the situation these officials face in the field.

A discussion with another DEO, this time in an urban area, brought forward the following point of view from a more developed area:

> The training course is too short. The curriculum materials are good but teachers are weak and slow learners. ..It looks like the MoE want to develop the curriculum, not to develop the human resource...Actually the policy set by the MoE level is far too high for our level to implement.

I include this to indicate that the difficulties are not to be found only in rural areas. I also note the use of the technical terms '*slow learners'* and '*human resource'*[47] have been adopted into this official's discourse. However she applies the terms to teachers and teachers are again found wanting because they are '*weak'* and *slow learners',* while the materials they are offered are '*good'.*

The three officials quoted above express, in different ways, the need for interventions in education reform to be addressed at a number of levels. This links to the views of Brinkerhoff (20010) and Davies (2011) drawn on in the previous chapter. The DEOs see adjustment necessary at the levels of ministry, developer and policy and well as adjustment to the training courses. In summary I pull together the views of these administrators:

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[47] I checked with the translator that the Lao technical term was used.

- the change is bigger than is currently addressed by the level of in-service training;

- the courses are abstract and people need to see the new practices in action if they are to fully understand and be able to replicate them; and

- the move from mechanical implementation to a creative and flexible one is a very demanding process for which teachers are not prepared.

The identification of causes of constraint is only the first move to improvement. The above discussion reveals the complexity of moving towards an education system which addresses the needs of all its children in an information poor and low resourced country. However its schools function; there is considerable professionalism and a surprising amount of good will to be built on. Practical solutions must be found within existing levels of resourcing.

7.7   Taking agency and the relationship of agency to structure

The concern of this sub section is the ways structures set up by the reforms affect agency at field level. Building on the view of structure and agency I included in Section One of this chapter, I look at the ways recipients of capacity development activities do in fact take agency and how existing social structures support them and/or define limitations.

Centrally initiated change in education is not a new phenomenon in Lao PDR.

Since the revolution of 1975, education has been subject to a series of reforms, through new patterns of teacher recruitment, training and revisions to curricula. A senior provincial education official laughed at my question, *'What do you feel about education reform?* He answered jokingly, '*Are you talking about the first education reform, the second education reform, or the third education reform?*' However, he did see this reform as different, saying, *'Nowadays it is different, this changes our lives',* suggesting he constructs the reform as having impact on society as a whole. The same official of the PES told me of the range of training he has received:

> I attended a training course on Education and Management in France for one year, the same sort of course in Thailand for three months, a similar course in Vietnam for six months, and in the Philippines for three months. I also attended Training of Trainers for the Central Region.

He went on to name the donor-supported programmes that paid for his attendance at these courses. In response to my questions as to whether all were useful and if they were different he answered:

> The management courses are quite similar; but they are not concerned with our situation in Lao. I have to do a great deal of adaptation, and of course others working here don't agree. One person alone can't really change things.

The official confirms that adjustments which cover social attitudes as well as the development of systems have to be made for his experience to be employed effectively. His experience also indicates a random approach to training.

Opportunities for in-service training are related to project need, but also by social position and influence. Another factor is geographical location. The province in which the data for this study is collected has more than its fair share of projects because of its relative accessibility from the capital with roads accessible by car or four wheeled drive vehicle. It is also home to rural populations and, in the mountains, a variety of minority ethnic groups. An INGO official in interview in English reminded me that donor agencies are subject to controls themselves. He told me, '*We have to consider our donors. We need to show success, and good use of the money.* The INGO official went on to tell me, *'Very few donors will start projects in the very remote areas. Access to provinces of the far north and south is expensive to access and we just can't show enough outcomes'*. A similar attitude was expressed, in another country, in reviewing slow progress of a project, by the international officer of a bilateral donor who told me, in the context of slow progress of a project, *'We are accountable to our tax payers. We have to show them we have spent the money properly'*.

Strategies to take agency

Rappeleye (2006:227) argues that agency in education reform is represented by forces of acceptance and resistance. In line with Rappeleye's insight and definition of agency adopted for this thesis, I see agency as something that is not given but implies taking conscious control. Discussion with teachers suggests that they take agency largely by selecting the things they can and will do and rejecting those they cannot or will not do. I asked two teachers working in a rural school, in

interview through translation, what they have implemented of what they had been taught. The first told me:

> I do pair work and reading together, but I don't do debates or role play. Sometimes I sit the children in groups, mostly for reading; not for maths or the world around us. I would like to do more playing we don't have enough materials.

The second, picking up on what her colleague had said told me:

> I sometimes do groups but the furniture is difficult. Role play is hard but I like having pictures and telling stories.

I saw the classroom of the teacher who found it difficult to do group work, and appreciated the difficulty in setting up groups when benches are broken and desks are hard to move.

A powerful means of taking agency is by integrating the new into the old discourses, thus strategies to integrate conflicting justifications, ideologies and power sources are developed. The discourse of traditional teaching relies on teachers' authority; unquestioning acceptance by the child and rote based teaching and learning by constant repetition, and is closely related to the existing authority structures within society. In classroom observations I saw teachers selecting activities that could be undertaken without disturbing the existing social structures. Classrooms were decorated and children seated in groups, but teacher/child relationships were not disturbed.

My long experience of working in the MoE Lao PDR is that resistance or taking

agency is often in the form of *lack* of action. The cultural taboo on questioning the advice of a superior or expert, with constraints on expressing dissent, means that agency is exerted by allowing things to go undone. Acts apparently agreed by MoE officials with TA often go undone, a situation leading to extraordinary levels of frustration amongst donor officials and technical assistants, who have no understanding why agreed actions are not completed. Not acting is often linked to the fact that the action is considered unsuitable, or even undoable, rather than a neglect of duty.

In contrast I saw a very positive means of taking agency demonstrated by teachers working with children who do not speak Lao as their first language. In a country of some 6 million people there are some sixty five languages[48] and Education Law (2007) establishes Lao as the only classroom language of instruction. In various observations of Lao classrooms, over time, I have seen teachers devising and using techniques for working with children with whom they do not share a common language. My observations show that teachers, faced with a multilingual class, developed strategies for survival. Three teachers in separate interviews through translation told me, '*I have learned a few words of Hmong*'; '*If a child can't understand I call a brother or sister from another class*' and '*I have a mother who speaks Khmu who comes to work with me when the children are new to school*'. These are all strategies I have recommended in for use in UK schools for working with children who do not speak English. The teachers' approach is an example of Habermas's statement that all of us draw on

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[48] Number varying as different definitions of language and dialect are used.

greater resources than we know or can articulate (Thomassen 2010:29). Teaching

non speakers of Lao does not form a part of in-service training and I speculated

that the lack of a model backed by authority allows a greater level of agency. A

corollary to this thought could be that teachers left without capacity development

activity would exercise more agency, something which could be related to the

post-development theorists who argue for a policy of non interference from

development agencies. I do not suggest this as a way forward, but suggest that

much greater attention is given to the circumstances which do allow teachers to

take agency.

The modern methods present a way of working which encompasses both a new

language, e.g. creativity, flexibility and 'child-centred', and new social practices

e.g. children speaking to each other in the classroom and asking questions of the

teacher. While promoting methods developed in a democratic tradition, the new

methods are offered to teachers in an authoritative manner and gain their power

from authority rather than information and persuasion. Mohammad and Harlech-

Jones (2008) note something similar in teacher preparation in Pakistan,

expressing regret at the missed opportunity for teachers to exercise autonomy,

imagination, innovation, spontaneity, enquiry and flexibility. There is an ambiguity

here. The task of preparing teachers to be autonomous and to take greater

agency is vital to the development of a poorly resourced education system, but

desire to speed up the pace of reform new knowledges are presented in an

authoritarian manner, which leaves little space for taking agency.

Pace of change as a factor constraining agency

A theme raised by actors at many levels of the education systems is the difficulty of grasping new and difficult concepts in a short time. A high level MoE official told me, in interview in English:

> We have nominate counterparts but at central level people are very overload and counterparts don't have enough time to absorb the skill and to transfer it to lower level. Technical assistance should be able to adapt to local situation, but sometimes they can't[49].

The statement describes a number of the issues the Ministry faces. Officials are overworked and not only have to learn new knowledges but must teach them to others. The notion that knowledges have to be adapted to the local situation is mooted and the official finds external TA consultants not always able to make those adaptations. The official also perceives the expectation of the reform to be unrealistic because of the many demands made on MoE officials and the inability of TA.

My own experience of working in a Ministry office (Chapter Six) confirms high workloads. Lao PDR, like many small and poor countries, has a very small Ministry of Education staff and individual administrators have to play a number of roles. Officials are expected to have detailed technical knowledge of education as well as ability to mount training courses, monitor at field level and undertake heavy managerial and administrative duties, and all this takes place in a resource

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[49] I have recorded the words as they were spoken to me.

poor environment. I would suggest that the demands are much higher than those of an equivalent official working in a developed country, because of the broad range of skills required. Capacity then also covers a notion of enough people to do the jobs and in this sense the Ministry lacks capacity, confirming the significance of a discourse of infrastructure and resource to capacity development. In Lao PDR, the MoE does not have enough people to undertake increasing demands made by the reform.

A story of three PAs

I include this story because it illustrates the ways social structures and personal interpretations impact on the ability of three field officials to take agency. It is taken from a translated discussion with three young and enthusiastic professional assistants (PA). The PA's role is to support professional practice in primary schools and they are attached to a district education office. All three were enthusiastic about their in-service training through a donor-supported programme and felt confident to do their jobs. In a long conversation in which they spoke competently and enthusiastically about the differences the training had made to their approach. I heard a number of examples of their work and working style. One told me:

> I go into a school and talk to the teachers. I watch what they do and we talk about any problems they have. It's usually about how to teach some lessons; usually they find maths difficult. I can give advice on the content of the curriculum and how to help the children to learn.

After some time, one interviewee relaxed enough to tell me, *'We can only visit six schools. The others[50] are far away, some more than fifty kilometres, and some we can only get there when the river is high. But anyway we don't have motor bikes or money for fares'*.

Their training was designed to increase their agency but the PAs constructed the situation as one in which their effectiveness was limited by insufficient attention to the structures they work within. In these circumstances low efficiency can be construed as located in poor planning and financial allocation. The PA's situation is an example of the thesis proposed by Brinkerhoff and by Davies that failure on the ground is located at one or more levels of the education system, in this case failure to coordinate planning with resource allocation and poor understanding of the constraints posed by the context of implementation.

When I returned to Vientiane after the field study, I mentioned the situation to the Lao programme manager of the agency supporting this intervention, who responded. '*They are quite lazy you know. They don't want to make difficult journeys and stay in villages overnight.*'

It is not for the study to select a 'true' explanation, but I was interested to explore the origins of the two discourses, one of inadequate support, the other of unwillingness. I suggest the views expressed by the PAs originate in a hierarchical discourse. The PAs are used to implementing actions passed down to

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[50] There are 34 primary schools in the district

them. In an authoritarian system, they have never been expected to be proactive or to develop their own means to pursue goals which would mean being proactive in finding transport to distant villages. Coca Cola and Heineken beer are transported even to very remote villages in Lao PDR. But PAs do not construct their role in this way nor, significantly, do DEB officials around them. The donor official is drawing on a discourse of incapacity which in this case he expresses as 'laziness'. I recognised that the parties are drawing on different discourses with different antecedents. The recognition does not in itself recommend particular action but it is an important step in growing understanding of why those who have had capacity development training do not always take greater agency.

7.8   Reflections on the chapter

In this chapter I have ranged widely over factors impacting on the education offered to children in rural schools and here I record some reflections generated by this chapter, in relation to the findings of previous chapters and return to relevant theorists.

Two groups of discourses of education reform

I identified the discourses of education reform in operation in Lao PDR falling into two groups, each occupying its own space and with little overlap between them. One is epitomised by ESWG and the policy documents it has generated. This group of discourses collectively forms an aspirational discourse, looking towards

an international standard of education, matching the standards of ASEAN and providing the workforce for an expanding economy. It is backed by the strong discourses of government and donors. The other forms a discourse of practice. It is pragmatic and associated with implementers, based in what is perceived to be reasonable change within the existing, limited resources. The first discourse is what we want to do; the second what we can do. The aspirational discourse as a social determinant has more power, because it is supported by a powerful hierarchy and it informs policy papers, government directives and even education law. The discourse of practice has less power, because it is backed by less authority and is refutable by a discourse of incapacity. I suggest that the emphasis placed by donor agencies on aspirational discourse has had the effect of diverting attention from the discourses of practice, which ultimately have more power to bring about change in the short term and for this generation of children.

In poor societies, in which resources are limited, there is understandable pressure to change an education system in a short time. However, the attempt to short cut development processes results in waste of precious resources because it does not provide the structures that support the necessary change and does not equip implementers with the means of taking agency.

The power of existing ideologies

From observation of Lao classrooms after in-service training of teachers I see the power of existing assumptions of what a child is, what teaching and learning is and the relationship between teacher and child as something which both allows

teachers to assert agency, but hampers change because of the failure of social structures to adapt. The failure on the part of developers to recognise the power of existing ideologies is a factor depressing achievement and the unthinking ascribing of failure to 'incapacity' prevents attention to the real constraints to change.

Diagnosis of constraint is the first step to addressing it, but it must be followed by practical measures, which may not lie in a single action, but requires adjustment to more than one level and context.

Structuration theory

To understand these questions of knowledges and ideology, I return to theory. I first go back to the work of Giddens and the theory of structuration to help reflect on the data of this chapter. With Giddens (1984:17) I have come to see the structure of donor aided education structure as both an enabling and constraining force. New structures are designed to provide a platform for increased agency but because designers fail to pay sufficient attention to the power of existing structures, they do not fully support changed activity. I saw teachers and officials as knowledgeable agents, taking agency largely by absorbing new into existing practices. In this way change is stabilised at a low level of impact.

Through the study I have come to see structure both as something external to individuals, in the form of political, cultural and knowledges and also as

internalised attitudes and perceptions. These factors both limit and offer support to agency, but their power is seriously underestimated by those designing and providing capacity development activities.

Bourdieu: symbolic violence

To take a rounded perspective, I examined the notion of agency through Bourdieu's (1991) construct of symbolic violence, by which he offers explanation of the ways power structures relate to performance. By symbolic violence, Bourdieu refers to the imposition of categories of thought and perception by powerful forces upon dominated people, with the important corollary that those people take the social order to be just. In the case of the three PAs an apparently empowering move has not led to greater agency because existing structures constrain their perception of the agency they are able to exercise. It also illuminates the donor official's responses, which reveals recourse to a foundational discourse of incapacity and constructs *'them'* as other, with different motivations and abilities, a factor which increases the gap between policy and practice and polarises the two discourses.

An example of symbolic violence is provided by the head of a Provincial Education Service (PES) in interview through a translator. I asked about the success of teacher in-service activities. This was his answer:

> The trainees are not active at upgrading themselves. Since they are old they lack enthusiasm and do not think the course is relevant to them. Additionally their living

conditions are poor and they are in old age, so they are not active or able to upgrade their effectiveness.

I see this as symbolic violence because the perception derives power from a discourse of incapacity which creates new categories of failure. In the example above the PES official identifies old age, being poor and lacking enthusiasm as categories of failure. Interestingly the view inverts a cultural stance normal to Lao PDR that age is equated to wisdom and knowledge, and older people are given respect and seen to be wise. I also linked this thought to a view expressed by Parfitt (2002:161), who suggests that in times of change good outcomes can never be guaranteed for all and there are inevitably winners and losers. In Lao PDR older teachers may lose respect and status and their experience becomes devalued. From a systems view, the violence done must be less that the overall benefit, i.e. capacity development measures must produce significantly more teachers who can raise children's attainment, than those whose performance is lowered. Arguably this is not currently the case.

Foucault

I also turned to the work of Foucault and his views on power and knowledge. The most important feature of Foucault's (1977) view for this study is that the mechanisms of power are able to produce and validate[51] what is accepted as knowledges and that a powerful discourse causes some knowledges to be

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[51] Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/.

accepted and others rejected. I argue that the '*new methods'* are validated by a discourse of authority. Donor aided education reform has itself become an expert system which in itself validates new knowledges, leaving little room for challenge or contrary perception, because recipients are not given the tools or fora for that evaluation.

Each of these three theoretical frameworks is useful in analysing what people do with reform. While for some, such as older teachers, the power of new discourses can be seen to be symbolically violent, other teachers resist power and power structures to exert their own agency – whether in selectively choosing parts of the discourse which can fit their existing practice, or in taking agency outside the official capacity development training, such as in creatively working with ethnic minority children. Yet whether and how their knowledges will be validated remains in question.

7.9   Conclusion to the chapter

The chapter has addressed the questions posed in the first section of the chapter about the effects of reform. I have suggested that the reform interventions have little impact on existing social structures which wield considerable power in defining roles and areas of action for both teachers and children. Teachers do take agency within the new procedures, but, in most cases, in ways which confirm rather than challenge both existing authority structures and the common sense understanding of the teachers' role and the view of what a child is.

Reflections on the chapter's findings leads me to question the assumption underlying the current design of capacity development courses for teachers to bring about significant change in teaching/learning practice. I see the assumption as ideologically based in a wishy washy version of liberal democracy, neither sufficiently confident in itself nor presented sufficiently robustly to bring about the intended change. This does suggest the need for a fundamental review of both content and presentation of the courses, and particularly their ideological basis. Is a watered down version of a child-centred approach the best that can be offered in this context?

In the next chapter I reflect on the study's implementation in terms of the chosen methodology and its potential impact.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LESSONS LEARNED AND ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE PRACTICE OF THE STUDY

8.0   Overview of the chapter

In this chapter I reflect on the process of undertaking the study and issues emerging from its practice in order to pull together thoughts, reflections and lessons learned. I look firstly at the choice and use of the broad methods of data collection, that is, ethnography, a critical approach and discourse analysis.

I go on to review the choice and impact of specific data collection methods adopted. Subsequently I consider the use of the data analysis tools and, taking into account a particular interest, the positioning of the researcher in relation to the contexts of study. I reflect on issues that arose as I undertook the study, including the impact of the study on my pre-existing ideology and the ways the tensions between the roles of consultant and researcher have impacted on the study.

8.1   Broad methodology of data collection

The study has elicited and contrasted the views and experiences of actors who

stand in differing relations to the donor aided education reform, in the attempt to gain deeper understanding of the processes and impact of related interventions. The study has addressed this by illuminating the processes of education reform in Lao PDR at various levels and contexts of the education system, a stance not taken before quite in this way in Lao PDR, and, although informed by the work of other researchers and commentators, it has inevitably taken an exploratory approach, raising questions of what can be achieved by the research and how it may best be done.

I look first at the validity of the original choice of theoretical framework.

8.1.1 The adoption of an ethnographic approach

Based in my own perspectives and the needs of the study, I selected ethnographic principles and practices to provide the theoretical framework to the research practices. While the study was originally planned as a series of semi structured interviews with government officials and teachers, I jumped at the opportunity, for example, to observe the ESWG meetings. Government permission allowed me to spend time in schools. Informal discussions were generated with ministry and donor officials, all of which extended my understanding. I also drew on knowledge and information gained through a long career in education, so in practice, I followed both planned and opportunistic means of gathering data. The serendipitous approach is, in itself, normal in an ethnographic approach, as ethnographers draw on a range of sources of data.

However, since I moved between a number of contexts, with differing positioning towards them, I consider whether the study can be truly said to be ethnographic. For example in the ESWG meeting, I was an observer rather than participant observer and in classrooms, I chose to observe how teachers implemented the new knowledges, placing myself as an onlooker.

I noted in Chapter Two that ethnography has been described as depends on continuous presence, on-going interaction and the development of relations (LeCompte and Schensal [2010]). The study was possible because of my knowledge of education in Lao PDR and the relations I have developed over time, resulting in permissions to undertake the work, to talk to Ministry officials and to visit schools. However, my presence was not continuous. I suggest that the research can nonetheless be characterised as ethnographic because of the intention to '*tell the story*' of the education reform (Hammersley 1990). I approached education reform as an order of discourse with a number of constructing contexts, inevitably standing in different relationships to the participants and the contexts. In this study, I see ethnography as lying with my intention to understand what participants are seeing of the reform situation. Another indicator is the selection of methods of analysis. Hammersley (2007:3) identifies the means of analysis of research data as an important marker of an ethnographic approach. Analysis of ethnographic data, he says, lays the emphasis on the '*interpretation of meanings, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices*'.

The ethnographic approach has allowed me to respond to presenting situations and to adapt the study to the variety of research situations. The result is an interpretive account of a number of contexts which builds insights into the understanding and acceptance of donor-supported education reform. The positioning of the researcher as insider or outsider has been of interest throughout the study and I address in again in Section 8.2 below.

8.1.2 The adoption of a critical approach

I now examine the choice of a critical approach to data collection and analysis. Thomas (1993:4), whose work was first quoted in Chapter Three, suggests that a defining feature of critical research is the desire to bring about change. I adopted a critical perspective, with the expectation that my research would bring about change. As the study took shape I began to question the direct relationship between new knowledges produced by research and change.

The adoption of a critical approach implies a belief that the creation of knowledges can impact for the better on researched communities. In a critical model (see Horkheimer and Adorno (1982:244) and Habermas (esp 1984a), the theorist or researcher plays a powerful role in alerting people to the constraints they face, and provides information which then becomes available to people or groups for reflection and action. A critical approach is related to liberation or setting free, and the process of change is generated by reflection and action of groups of concerned people.

Critical research and development outcomes

To explore the expected relationship between a critical research approach and development outcomes, I looked at interventions in development aid based on a critical perspective. Torres and Morrow (2002) link the work of Habermas to that of Freire, and indicate that it has been used to good effect in development contexts. Marti (2003:327) says that Habermas' approach has been used to advantage in bringing about positive development, especially in South America. Since the transfer of knowledges is of interest to the study, I gave particular consideration to her following statement:

> In TCA, Habermas formulates the notion of communicative rationality, that is, the way subjects use knowledge to reach understanding, rather than how they acquire this knowledge.

Marti's statement identifies a discontinuity between the acquisition of new knowledges and changed practice. Freire (see especially 1973) instituted a model of emancipation which delivered new knowledges, but change or liberation itself is brought about by a further level of intervention, by community action through participatory action research.

Kim (2009) makes a more extensive challenge to critical theory as a means of changed practice. He argues that neither Giddens nor Habermas convincingly sketches a mechanism that would allow people to move from exposure to the views of theorists (including researchers) to a process of contesting what is

offered to them, that is, he sees no specific mechanism to link the two activities.

The commentator Kim is himself of Korean nationality and uses examples from a Confucian based society to illustrate his criticisms of critical theories (see especially 2004:32/33) of both Giddens and Habermas. While Lao PDR is not a Confucian society, Kim's perception is of interest because, by bringing a Confucian perspective to his analysis, he challenges the hegemony of a western thinking. From the study I came to see critical theorising is culturally and politically located in western Europe. For example it is predicated on effective public fora for discussion. In the fully centralised socialist, political system, which encourages conformity and discourages discussion and challenge, public discussion cannot be taken for granted.

I have argued throughout this study that the new knowledges which reach the teacher in the rural school are insufficient to support the required change. I also suggest that knowledges alone, without fora for discussion, for the review of practice and for challenge, will not provide the impetus to move towards a greatly improved education system in Lao PDR.

I agree with Fairclough (2003a.1) (first quoted in Chapter One) that increased knowledge is the first step to change. The study indeed offers insights which could impact on practice. However the experience of the study has made me wary of making a direct relation between new knowledges and impact. I see the need for action which links new knowledges to change. A critical approach provides tools

of analysis which can be powerful in identifying areas of constraint but new knowledges must find a home. I looked for examples of practical means to bridge this gap between knowledges and practice. Suggestions have been mooted, for example by Bolton (2005:1) who suggests that the solution to the perceived gap between theory and practice in Habermas' model is by replacing the technical expert with the reflective planner. However, the current model of change is highly embedded in the existing discourses of donors and government. The replacement of the technical expert by the reflective planner would require an important shift in practice - donors would need to change their tendering procedures and GoL would need to release of money against speculative rather than fully formulated plans.

The need for a paradigm shift

Kuhn, (1962) whose work was related to major change in scientific fields, suggests that change does not occur through gradual and patient enquiry, but quite suddenly when a number of people identify that old methods are not solving the problems facing them. The analysis of development of the early 21st century, culminating in the Paris Declaration may be seen as a paradigm shift, but, as was said to me by a conference attendee from Africa (see Section 6.4.3), participants in education reform in a number of countries have not yet experienced significant change in donor-supported development practice. A new approach is needed to move donor aided development away from the current output driven model, which relies on measurable outcomes and is delivered through a pre-existing perception

of '*good*' education and driven by the fear of losing money to corrupt practices. This relates to King's view (2007) that donor agencies are increasing their dominance in the construction of a global agenda for education through the influence they are able to bring to bear in the creation of the MDGs.

A critical ethnographic stance to the study has been powerful in directing the research to uncover hidden assumptions, unexpected areas of constraint and bringing new insights into the process and practices of donor-supported education reform**.** A means for those insights to influence practice would be required. A group of people who recognise the ineffectiveness of current thinking and practice, is needed to review, reflect, discuss and produce something new.

Conclusion to the section

In this section of Chapter Eight, I have developed discussion of the relationship between research and change. A change agenda to implies strengthening a populace with new knowledges but, I argue, these knowledges must include the skills to challenge existing practices and power structures. The study has shown the relative disempowerment and exclusion from discourse of education reform of most government officials from ministry to school. The current practice for teachers focuses on new practices with little attention to space or tools for individual and group critical reflection. I regard this as an important area for consideration for those wishing to improve the effectiveness of donor aid to development.

8.1.3 Donor aided education reform as discourse

The study challenged me to find a credible way to analyse the order of discourses of education reform, with many players and fields. In the planning of the study I was unsure of the adoption of discourse analysis as a methodology in a situation in which language may form a barrier to understanding. However discourse theory offers a construct greater than language and its significance lies in the means to address power structures situated in a specific context and a particular time. In this way, discourse offered both a supporting theory and a method of analysis (CDA). In particular it has offered a way of approaching and thinking about problems raised in the study and allowed me to unpick motivations and make explicit the assumptions underlying actions and texts. Rather than creating answers, discourse analysis has directed me to explore and to ask relevant ontological and epistemological questions.

8.2 Selection and use of data collection methods

The study employed a number of data collection methods. It does not claim to be comprehensive, rather looking closely at some selected contexts. At times the role of the researcher was defined by the situation. Having been invited to the ESWG meeting, the assigned role was that of observer. However, I was also able to draw on a previously built up habit of discussion with participants, creating a wider context of understanding.

A further set of insights was gained by the analysis of a programme planning document which I saw as an important step in getting decisions into practice. Through this analysis, ambiguous power relations were revealed. I also saw a level of collusion between donor and government, avoiding challenging existing structures of authority. The total effect was the decontextualisation of education reform activities, and the promotion of a purely technological approach.

I chose to interview field officials and teachers and to observe teachers in action. This allowed me to work with a number of rural government officials, schools and classrooms. The alternative would have been to spend more time with one or two schools in one district, an action which would certainly have allowed me to gain a clearer view from behind the head of those teachers. As it was, the combination of observation and interview gave me illustrations of attempts to make meaning in a new situation, a clear insight into to the teachers' desire to break out of their isolation and to embrace change, helping me to reflect on the adequacy of what they were being offered. Importantly in the field study, sufficient evidence was gained of skills and reflective ability among local officials and teachers to refute the discourse of lack of capacity.

Strengths and weaknesses of the approach

Choices had to be made as to the contexts to be studied and there is always speculation on possible missed opportunities or choices. Within its limitations, I feel a strength of the study was that it allowed me to build from one context to

another e.g. the recognition, raised at the ESWG, that there was a gap between policy and practice was followed, checked and confirmed in the other contexts of data collection. The discourse of lack of capacity was tested in a number of contexts, including interviews with donor officials, field meetings and in the literature of development.

A weakness of the approach may be a reduced level of attention to each area. Each could be and should be of sufficient interest to be the centre of a long term study. The study relies on a series of snapshots of selected discourses of education reform. The approach to the study has, nonetheless, I believe, provided a vehicle for reflection on a number of areas including interpretation by social actors at differing levels, disjuncture between discourses, the taking of agency, barriers to full participation and so on and I believe it has brought new insights to the area and has illuminated issues normally overlooked, which would not have been brought about by focus on just one area.

Ethical issues

In Section 2.5 of this study I raised a number of ethical issues concerned with gaining free and informed consent in a country in which many of the respondees would have little conception of why an outsider would undertake academic research. Also MoE permission was needed to undertake the study and this put the voluntary nature of participation in doubt. I did take endless trouble to explain my presence, the research and its purposes but I was still unsure whether

consent was understood or fully informed consent freely given. As I noted, in particular in Chapter Seven, the interviews seemed open and praise and criticism given thoughtfully and freely. A few respondents displayed reticence in answering, something I respected, but most respondees seemed to welcome the opportunity to explore the quite big changes to their working lives. MoE authorisation may, indeed, have been seen as a safeguard, or as permission to express ideas and feelings. However there is still a question in my mind over working with people who may not have had a clear conception of to what they were contributing.

8.2.1 Issues arising from the study's implementation

The practice of the study encountered issues over and above those predicted in Chapter Two. I discuss them below.

Issues of difference of interpretation between the researcher and respondents

I identified a tension between the meaning the participants themselves attributed to their experience and my interpretation of it. A number of interviewees offered a strong sense of excitement at undertaking training and new ideas. They largely characterised problems encountered as a part of their jobs, just something that had to be coped with. From my external vantage point, I saw people who had not been fully prepared for change and who deserved and needed better support. There is a tension between their own characterisation of their experience and my interpretation of it. By adopting an ethnographic approach, I make the claim to

reveal social reality as viewed by members of the setting in question. The tension produced by differing interpretations of the situation has been noted by commentators such as Millen (1997), who has critiqued unchallenged assumptions in feminist research. If researchers are genuinely seeing through others' eyes, Millen argues, then the *'tension'* should not arise. I did, at least to some extent, get behind the heads of respondents and see the world from their point of view. At the same time I was aware that I brought my own system of values and ideologies and, as such, I could make no pretence at objectivity. Lew (2011:163) makes a similar point when she argues:

> Predicated on the understanding that observations and stories are rarely 'captured' but, instead, framed by the experience and perspectives of a particular researcher, the interpretivist approach deeply challenges researchers to interrogate and disclose their own subjectivity and positionalities.

Her next statement is of particular interest to the study because of the attention it has paid to the positioning of the researcher:

> Such reflexivity (is concerned with) breaking down power relations in dichotomous oppositions of researcher and research, outsider and insider and knower and known.

I found this view valuable as it released me from having to position myself as either insider or outsider but to position myself to the best advantage in relation to each context.

Differing roles of the researcher in relation to the study

In Chapter One I noted three major identities in relation to the study – my long term role as teacher, the role as international consultant in education, and the newer role of researcher during the field visits for the study.

I explained in the first chapter that my principled approach to education was built largely in a teaching career in UK. A result was that I felt huge solidarity with the teachers I met, and underlying all interaction with them was the unspoken question, '*Could I do what they are expected to do with the level of support they get?* My role as teacher allowed connection with the respondents in school and, I feel sure, facilitated open discussion.

The role of consultant could be constructed in opposition to that of researcher, the one looking in from outside for results, the other trying to see the action from the point of view of the recipient. I had to ask myself if the role of consultant became confused with that of the researcher during the field work. Lew's discussion above helps to see that I do not have to create dichotomies between my identities as teacher, consultant and researcher. All researchers bring multiple experience and bring all identities to play in building their research. The role of consultant placed me as insider in the practice of education reform, and, through this role, I had created the relationships which allowed the work to happen. In classroom observations, there was a level of evaluation of the teachers' use of the new methods, but with the intention to consider the support they had been given rather than the teachers' performance in itself.

After reflection I would argue that question lies not in managing whether I managed to keep separate the differing identities but whether I accepted the challenge, deeply, to interrogate and disclose my own subjectivity and positionalities (after Lew as above).

The impact of the study on the researcher's philosophical position

In Chapters One and Two I identified the ways my philosophical approach had developed and my resultant ontological view of education. I reflected on whether the study has changed my conceptual understanding and philosophical approach, developed largely in education in England. My basic understandings do in fact hold true in education reform in Lao PDR. I believe that people work better when their skills are recognised and when their voice is heard. I believe that children should be in schools that validate them as people and as learners. However an important learning point is that those conditions are not only located in one cultural context or one approach. They can and do exist in a number of social, cultural and political contexts and the aggrandisement of the western liberal approach itself does, at times, create barriers to development.

A flawed system?

In Section 3.3.2, I considered whether, in what might appear to be a flawed system, it is appropriate to undertake studies which act to imply there can be improvements of the current practice which would make it benign, rather than

rejecting it wholesale and looking for radical alternatives. After the study, I am convinced that there is a role for international support to small countries seeking to reform their education systems. As a teacher I value the generalised principles of learning from one other, exchange of educational ideas and selecting the best practices for a particular context. The Paris Declaration formulated widely accepted principles in which to base development work. I argue that focus should now be switched to the ways those principles are put into practice, with much better informed action, through the identification of barriers, misunderstandings, mismatches and poor practice at all levels of the system.

8.3 Selection of tools of data analysis

Amongst a number of models of data analysis, I selected a mode based on methods of analysis developed by Fairclough (2001) for CDA. He is explicit in declaring that his procedures for analysis are designed for use as a means to inspect power relationships in the discourses of modern Britain and that aspects of his procedures on analysis rely of exploring the selection and juxtaposition of words, grammatical constructions, and metaphors. Therefore the procedures could not be adopted without change. However, the approach is based in some principled questions, which were adaptable to the situation of education reform in Lao PDR. Based in this approach I was able to construct the tools which have offered a means of addressing the task and of prompting specific areas of questioning. CDA provides a flexible tool which, while offering a thinking structure, allows creation of adaptable to the specific context studied. Thus in each area of

enquiry, the structure remained the same but the questions differed and I suggest that the approach and the questions can be adapted for use in a number of contexts. I relied largely on two of his stages of analysis, *interpretation* and explanation, especially the subsections, *social determinants*, *ideology and effects.* I discuss their use individually below.

Interaction

From Fairclough's stage *interaction,* I took the view of context as a constructing force, changing my previous understanding of it as a static snapshot of an existing situation. I came to see context as a dynamic entity, with meaning derived from its history and possible future as well as current action. As a thinking tool, it provided a means to understand the implications of actions and to speculate on possible future development. The approach is also derived from the thinking of Giddens (1994:Ch.6 pp: 198/199) who argues that there is no way a static analysis can be carried out, as it inevitably involves notions of time and space. For the study I saw that a sense of history, of where and how actions were constructed, offers a means of understanding responses to change. For example, the origin of the discourse of lack of capacity in the international discourse of development and that it may be used to validate giving and receiving, argues that it must be challenged internationally as well as locally and at many levels of implementation. A discourse of child-centredness in schools on Lao PDR arises ideologically from western democracy, with the corollary that implementation difficulties may lie in ideological incompatibility as well as in implementation failure. Furthermore, the

relative ineffectiveness of TA interventions may lie in donor agencies' desire to

corruption proof their procedures as well as in individual or planning failures.

Social determinants

The conditions and practices of the wielding of power in educational reform in Lao

PDR has been a thread through the study. I looked at power relationships at

situational, institutional and societal levels in all the contexts of investigation.

Questions associated with Fairclough's category, *social determinants* have

provided a practical way to review the ways language and interactions maintain,

reflect and change power relations. The programme planning document analysed

in Chapter Five showed a text which decontextualized the activities of educational

reform and offered the view it built as 'truth'. My attention was focused on the

texts produced, e.g. by the ESWG meeting as both constructed by and

constructing of aspects of power structures of which the inspected texts are only

one part.

Ideology

The use of Fairclough's structure of questions also allowed me to see the place

ideology plays in education reform and to conclude that its power is greatly

underestimated. I take ideology as a set of ideas constituting people's and

systems' goals, expectations and actions. I saw individuals' and social ideologies

both as a driving force for change and a force for resistance at all levels of

intervention. I saw government officials at all levels and teachers making sense of new things by relating, referring and embedding them in what they already know. The teachers showed willingness to adopt changed teaching practices but ideologies of what a teacher is and what a child is has not significantly changed with the consequence that new ideas and practices are layered on top of existing, well understood practices.

At central level I saw donors and Government working from differing political ideologies, leaving the differences unacknowledged, with the consequence of a fudged vision of the reform. Throughout the study I saw the actors in education reform at various levels of the system attempting to bridge contrasting and, often conflicting ideological systems, something, I came to believe, which was significantly reduced the taking of agency.

Effects

In the study, I investigated the ways actors in education reform position themselves in relation to the new knowledges, what comes to be adopted and what is rejected, and who wields the authority to say so. I saw the attempt to construct education reform as an expert system that can be packaged and delivered. I looked in particular at what power actors can access in order to take agency in education reform and the extent to which they take ownership of change practice, e.g. changed teaching methodology and new financial reporting procedures. The investigation also challenged me to be clearer about my own

stance and to analyse what I mean when I use words such as '*better*' or

'*improved*' in relation to development interventions.

Conclusion to the section

With some adjustment I found Fairclough's procedure of analysis generalisable to the analysis of a text constructed and located in the social and cultural setting of donor aided education reform in Lao PDR. Adjustments included lowering emphasis on selection of grammar and vocabulary, metaphors and culturally bound interpretations and focusing attention more on the wide range of contexts of construction and use, indicators of power structures and relations, and using analysis as a means to consider origins and future effects of current practices. Fairclough's procedures provided the support of generic questions which I as researcher, developed to meet the purposes of her own study.

8.4   Language issues raised by the study

I now engage in analysis of the strength and limitations of undertaking an ethnographic study in a country in which the language is not my own. The use of language in itself plays an important role in the theories of social action which I chose to scaffold this study. Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (1984a and b) with the construction of an ideal speech situation, and Giddens' Theory of Structuration (1984) both rely heavily on language as a means of investigation, as do ethnographic approaches and those based on discourse analysis. The

decision to address donor aided education reform in Lao PDR as a discourse placed focus on language and raised specific areas of interest which are discussed here.

Analysis of the texts of non native English speakers and translated texts

Analysing data gained through translation or from people whose first language is not English raised a number of issues for the study, in particular about the ways meanings are created in data collection and interpreted by the analyst. In the vast body of literature on discourse analysis, I found a great deal of information on the use and impact of non-standard dialects in educational situations (see especially Labov 1970), and a small body of research by linguists working on cross-linguistic discourse analysis and contrastive rhetorical traditions (Moder and Martinovic-Zic 2004). I found little literature concerned with the use of different languages and different rhetorical traditions as they impact on the discourses of development aid and yet this would seem an area of importance as English and less often French or Spanish become the languages of communication in development situations. In development aid situations many texts are produced by non native speakers, and increasingly in the many divergent forms of English such as Indian English and Singaporean English. Also it is the norm, rather than aberrant, for written and spoken texts to be expressed in a second (or third or fourth) language by writers and speakers from differing language backgrounds, using the dominant languages of development discourse.

I have noted the impact of differing linguistic traditions, in particular the roles assigned to different groups e.g. in analysis of ESWG I saw who was constructed as having power to speak and who did not. I have paid attention to language variation when analysing translated texts and I see this as area deserving greater attention and in depth study.

Generalisation and lack of specificity of terms

I have identified in this study the negative impact of over generalisation of terms in the discourse of donor-supported education reform i.e. ownership and participation. I am also aware that I have of necessity, indulged in generalisations and lack of specificity about what a term might involve in this thesis. In particular I have addressed 'donors' as a group with a common approach, though there are significant different managerial, cultural and ideological differences in their ways of working. I also became aware of the difficulty that the donor group was experiencing in acting as a group and that there were tensions between donor agencies in attempting cooperative ventures. In Lao PDR donor agencies have however created a situation which allows them to address reform issues as a group and to be addressed as a group, and by identifying commonality of action, I have been able to raise and address significant issues in the interaction between donor agencies and government.

I also noted the difficulty of pinning down exactly what is meant by some words as they are used in development discourse. Words such as ownership and

participation are often generalised. Maeda (2007:359-360) addressed this point in her PhD study when she draws attention to the fact that, '*The unclear aid-specific terminology invite(s) criticism about the validity of the discourse'.* Her expression links with Bourdieu's (1990:56) notion of 'fuzzy logic', which he represents as acquired common sense. I interpret this as a process of assimilating words to existing linguistically and culturally defined schemata with possibility of reinterpretation and words occupying new semantic spaces. The importance of this was noted by donors in the minutes of a donor consortium which recorded, under the heading of "Terminology/Shared definitions', at line 55, '*For building shared vision, it is essential that we all understand the same meaning from specific terms by taking time to build consensus around definitions and ensure use of appropriate and consistent terminology*'. The comment refers to lack of shared meanings amongst the members of the donor consortium in Lao PDR. No specific examples were given but the issue is more widely noted. Phillips and Economou (in Watson 2001:119) discuss the findings of their study of European Union Education policy where, because of the range of language backgrounds, they point out that terms such as 'European identity', 'European civilisation', 'democracy', 'social justice' and 'respect for human rights' are understood differently in different places. Both the minutes of the donor consortium in Lao PDR and the EU Education Policy document raise the difference in interpretation as an issue but neither suggests a strategy for moving towards a better joint understanding.

Amorphous expression may indicate the irrelevance of the concepts themselves,

that is, if we cannot explain to ourselves what '*participation*' or 'ownership' means we should avoid the use of both the word and the concept. However Parfitt (2002:160), basing his views in the work of Derrida, takes a different view. He suggests that while the lack of specificity can indicate unclear understanding, it can also be interpreted as a sign of continued relevance and continued striving; allowing the possibility of flexibility and adaptability to reconstruct processes. What I did not see during the study was discussion of meanings. This could be productive in revealing not only differences in meaning assigned but in differences in ideology and expectation attached to them.

I identified a process of extending and expanding the meanings of words to the point where they became fuzzy. I also saw a process of narrowing of meaning. I have previously mentioned in the study that words and terms are reified in development speak. Takahashi (in Maeda 2007) alerted me to an opposite process to over generalisation, that is the narrowing of meanings. Reflecting on the word 'p*artnership*', she shows that it has become a 'cosy term', giving it an ideological aspiration and making it hard to disagree with, a situation which suppresses rigorous evaluation, and imposes limitations to thought.

I also argue that the meta-narratives of the discourse of education reform also become reified; that is, a western form of democratic political system has become accepted as *'good'* and socialism as the 'i*nevitable*' form of government for Lao PDR. The process of reification limits challenge. The very particular example thrown up by the study is the reification of the term '*capacity development'*, shown

the study to be constructed as if it were a unified thing, jointly understood, rather than a loose conglomeration of activities.

Issues surrounding translation

Issues related to translation in the collection of data and its analysis have been addressed throughout the study. Phraxayavong (2009:15) shows that the very words used for '*development aid'* promote an erroneous view. The translated expression '*kan xoy leua'* he argues, promotes a view of '*generosity, charity, humanitarian or friendly action'*, which encourages people to see aid as given away freely, something, he argues, which works to reduce the feeling of responsibility of the recipient.

Translation is of considerable importance in development aid when the transmission of complex ideas is presented in English by a technical assistant to the Lao speaking recipients. Because of the current utilisation of technical assistance, many documents are prepared in English and translated into Lao. A Lao national consultant, in interview in English, identified the lack of clear agreed vocabulary as a constraint to transmission of new concepts, noting that reform in education requires the adoption of new concepts and the vocabulary to express them but with little attention given to the ways the new words are received and understood. The national consultant also described a negative outcome of producing handbooks and manuals in English to be translated into Lao, and argued, 'they (the translators) don't have a deep understanding on the concepts

so the final result is not clear'. Her argument was confirmed by the DEB official quoted in Chapter Seven who found the handbooks of in-service training difficult to follow.

8.5   Conclusion to the chapter

In this chapter I have reflected on the implementation of the study and reviewed appropriateness of the broad and specific research methods, as well as issues raised by the implementation of the study. Surfacing complex issues in the process of critical ethnography, together with some equally complex subjects that arise from such ethnographic work, such as language use, lead to the key question of whether donors and governments really welcome such critical research and how and where it might find a home. The existing preference for investing in 'what works', with the simplicity of packaged approaches may be more acceptable to donors and government than nuanced, discursive accounts of complexity and contradiction. However this chapter - and this study - has indicated that without the insights that would come from detailed research and honest evaluation, the impact of donor-supported reform will continue to be less effective than it might otherwise be.

In the next and last chapter I record the findings of the study in relation to the research questions and review the implications of the findings for donor aided education reform in Lao PDR.

CHAPTER NINE

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

9.0   Overview of the chapter

The research has underlined the urgency to break out of existing limiting perceptions in the search for ways to improve the practice of education in a developing country, something which has so far proved intractable. The study has brought new insights to development aid to education reform, in particular to the dynamics of participation in the reform agenda in Lao PDR. Overall the study has found that more detailed and politicised analysis is needed to understand the inequalities in relationships and subsequent inequality in access to decision making and ultimately the impact on change. A significant finding of the study is that there remain contradictory discourses of action (between donors, GOL and teachers) and, to a large extent, these discourses remain unexamined. Dominant discourses linked to 'correct' solutions remain unchallenged and an international search for the 'right answers' to educational development continues.

In this chapter I relate specific findings to the objective and five original research questions, with comments on prospective audiences and generalisability of the study, with final conclusions.

9.1 The overall findings of the study against objectives and research questions

The broad objective of the study is:

> to explore international development aid to education reform in Lao PDR, with specific focus on how reform initiatives are understood, experienced and put into practice by teachers in rural schools.

A methodology comprising interviews across central government officials, donors, local officers and teachers, together with observations of donor meetings and of classrooms as well as documentary analysis, confirmed the value of critical discourse analysis to surface meanings and their sources. It was established that education reform in Lao PDR is an order of discourse, that is, it is a network of, often competing, discourses. On the ground discourses reflect and generate differing realities. The study has shown that meanings, understandings and ultimately changed practice are generated in the action and reaction between the constituent discourses, for example the discourse of teachers' competence is the product of the elision between lack of training (which is in fact a reality) with the notion of a large gap in teachers' skill base (when they have many existing skills). MoE responses are located in social and political discourses, national and international, as well as in its interaction with donors and with its own existing education policy. The notion that meaning is located in the intersection of discourses is not new (see Scott 2003 quoted in Chapter Eight), but its application to the study has given a more subtle view of the way power is wielded and

understandings reached. While constituent discourses can be pulled out and examined separately, and this is a common way to address issues of development, a further depth of understanding is gained by seeing them as essentially elements of an overall discourse and much understanding of the processes and practices of development aid is gained by examining the ways those elements react together.

I go on to review the research findings as they relate to the specific research questions.

9.1.1   Research question one: public discourse of education reform

Research question one refers to the public discourse of education reform:

What does examination of the public discourse of education reform between donor agencies and GoL reveal of the positioning of agencies and individuals within that public policy discourse, the power structures revealed and possibilities for practical impact?

Overview of findings against research question one

The investigation was largely of the discourse of two ESWG meetings, separated by some eighteen months. My main findings in response to this research question are that, in a situation of public discourse which is new to Lao PDR, a number of attendees experienced the ESWG meetings as '*foreign'* and in practice, the Lao

imperative to avoid public disagreement overrode the donor imperative to widen

public discussion of education reform. Both donors and GoL made decisions in

private, in behind the scenes discussion, in avoidance of, I speculated, public

disagreement.

I also concluded that the provision of communicative spaces, with the invitation to

discussion and questioning, do not appear to lead to a process of consultation as

we understand it. I suggest that active participation in this new discourse is a

learned skill and that many participants have had little opportunity to learn and

exercise the necessary self-confidence and skills.

I saw the ESWG meeting as a social artifact, located in a model of development

discourse promoted by the donor community, drawing on models from Indonesia

and Cambodia, with an expectation of widened participation. It relates to the

Vientiane Declaration (2007) which is explicitly built on the Paris Declaration and

carries donor expectations of changed discourse style. However it exhibits many

characteristics of traditional Lao meetings. It was given high value by senior

officials of MoE and donor agencies and there was, amongst the donors a real

sense of satisfaction at its implementation, which, I considered, was not

commensurate with the very limited impact on existing power structures and its

role as a discussion forum.

The functions of the ESWG meetings as public discourse

The meetings can be seen as a poor example of public discourse if measured against Habermas' vision of an ideal discourse. However, they fulfilled some functions. They symbolised the desired relationship between donor agency and government; and gave status to the education reform. The ESWG meeting is located at the bisection of Lao tradition and an assumptive future, which, if realised, will demand and bring far reaching changes to Lao society. I saw that Lao discourse, represented by a Prime Ministerial speech, minimized the extent of change by locating change measures in existing and recognised discourses. The ESWG meetings may fulfill a similar function as a symbolic bridge between the old and the new discourses by presenting new things in the context of existing and well understood practices. As a symbolic event the meetings gained power from the significance ascribed to it by both donors and government. Questions are outstanding as to how its symbolic significance will be harnessed to play a role in positive change to practice in education.

A functional, communicative approach revealed certain achievements but I noted that the meetings fell far short of the donors' desire for an inclusive agenda. The need was felt for greater investigation and understanding of rhetorical traditions of non-western cultures to support a more inclusive approach.

The use of a register of development

The meetings showed a move towards the use of the register of development, in the English language. Control of this register empowers Lao citizens to take part in regional and global development discourse. It also gives symbolic gains within the country and confers privilege within the Ministry. Like all technical registers it has value as shorthand between people who bring similar understandings and expectations to bear. Observations of ESWG meetings showed that not all have equal access or understanding and the use of the register, in particular in English, excludes many participants. Existing authority structures were maintained as access to English is the outcome of access to a privileged education. Again the intention towards greater inclusivity is not yet realised. As it is, I found that current implementation has little impact on existing hierarchical practices and that cultural restrictions and factors that discourage contribution from women and lower level officials are not challenged.

The success of the meetings

I concluded that the general satisfaction of the success of the meetings amongst donor and high level MoE officials was preventing more in-depth, detailed analysis the working of the meetings. The reasons for low level of participation by junior level ministry officials in the ESWG meetings may relate to lack of confidence in English, and to gender expectations but largely, I suggest, relates to an unchanged Ministry culture which does not empower junior officials to voice

opinions. If greater participation is desired then these obstacles must be acknowledged and action taken and practical moves may be made to further involve junior officials, which may initially include greater use of the Lao language and circulation of shortened documents.

'Good' education policy

Donor agencies' main effort, in the period of research, was the development of improved dialogue with GoL and the creation of education policy and action plans. While the high MoE officials spoke proudly of the achievement of the policies, those concerned with implementation were explicit in their feeling that the expectations were '*too high'.* The opinion was expressed over and over again in a number of contexts that the new policies were good but difficult to put into practice. An overall finding is that there is a yawning gap in the discourse of education reform between centre and field and that policy is out of touch with practice. While the gap is not new and is not caused by the intervention of donor agencies, I argue that the emphasis placed by donors on policy development, without due attention to what is implementable, has exacerbated an existing situation and leads policy to be perceived as unimplementable.

I concluded that the gap between policy and practice promoted the view that poor field implementation was caused by incapacity on the part of field officials, that is, policies would bring about the required change if only field level officials had the capacity to implement them. This confirms Mosse's view, (2004) noted in Chapter

Three that donors are searching for a universal *'good'* policy and links closely to Caddell's (2005) finding that, for full effectiveness, field officials need understanding of the reasons underlying the actions they are required to perform.

Attitudes to confidentiality

I noted differing attitudes to confidentiality, with the MoE showing an openness, which representatives of the donor community did not display, an inversion of my previous stereotyping of a government routinely restricting information and donors pushing for greater transparency.

9.1.2 Research question two: the impact of documentation

The second research question referred specifically to the impact of the discourse of planning documents:

> What do programme planning documents reveal about the positioning of written documents in eventual application and the relationship of the new policies to changed education practices?

Overview of findings associated with research question two

Programme planning documents form an important link in the chain between the loan or grant and the work on the ground. I investigated one document in detail, in order to identify the power relations it demonstrates and the models of change to

education practice it reveals.

My overall finding is that the document proposed and addressed a situation which only tangentially matches the actual context of implementation of education reform, with consequent poor coherence between the document's solutions and the real issues to be addressed by educational implementers.

Origins of the document's discourse

Analysis of the document indicated that it drew on the international discourses of development aid as well as the discourses specific to the supporting bank. The resultant document avoids acknowledgement of the political, cultural and social complexities related to implementing educational change, by proposing a straight line between input and social improvement. I regard the document as epitomising an approach so firmly located in an existing paradigm of donor support to education reform that it prevents consideration of a more flexible, responsive approach.

In addition I concluded that the document set out to maintain existing power relations between donors and government, avoiding challenge to GoL's social and political practices and to the existing discourse of the supporting Bank. Both sides may find security in predictability and the approach may be regarded as a sensible compromise to ensure that the development interventions are allowed to happen. In Chapter Three I referred to Nye's theories of *'soft power'* and I reflect

on this as a use of such power, that is change by persuasion rather than the use, in this situation, of fiscal power. However I concluded that the approach is rather by the avoidance of 'difficult' areas instead of a positive expression of a belief set. The attempt to avoid ideology, in reality, results in the expression of an unacknowledged economistic ideology. Rather than the wielding of soft power, I came to see a more complicated relationship between donor and recipient than is often portrayed in the literature of development, (see for example related to Lao PDR see Phraxayavong [2000] and worldwide the ODI briefing paper [April 2006]). I characterised the relationship to some extent as collusion, in the attempt to avoid issues which disconcert both partners.

GoL ownership

There is ambiguity in the ownership of the document, which, while attributing it to Lao government ownership, has many characteristics of a donor owned document not least the statements of GoL's incapacity. GoL's endorsement of the document, in the face of this negativity needed consideration. The reasons for acceptance may be complex. The achievement of a grant or loan may present power gains both in control of the money and in the gaining of symbolic capital. GoL may value the use of the money more than the reputation of one ministry. I also question the rationale for a Bank supported document to take such a negative stance. I speculate that it lies, at least to some extent, in its own internal justification for giving a grant or loan, which goes something like this, '*We are giving a large amount of money so the recipient must be ineffective*'. This insight links to a

realisation that the function of donors is to give and the greater the need of the recipient, the more easily justified the loan or grant.

Unrealistic expectation

I noted that the document plans a programme with unrealistic expectation of the intervention's impact. The document proclaims a straightforward path between input and output, that is '*Direct benefits'* (para 76) are planned and, the document argues that, through a chain of implementation, their impact is magnified. Thus, the expansion of enrolment in secondary education will lead, through a chain of impact, to poverty reduction and improved social development. The links are asserted, not justified, and constraints, other than the lack of capacity in the MoE, are unacknowledged. In this way promises are made which are difficult to honour.

Surface features of the text

A register of project documentation was employed, using a highly compacted style, presenting the process as free from ideology and portraying education reform as a series of technical interventions. Yet, I would argue, social action cannot take place without social assumptions and an economistic view is presented as an unchallengeable truth.

I investigated the way textual devices are used to build this '*truth*'. '*Quality*' was mentioned forty times in the 19 pages. I suggest that repetition indicated its

importance, but quality in education was not defined, and a prior joint understanding was implied, something this study and previous experience leads me to believe does not exist. An outcome is that technical assistants are, unwittingly, delegated the power to flesh out what quality in education means and how it should be achieved, which is turn leads to the introduction of unchallenged international solutions.

Repetition of the terms *'capacity'* and '*capacity development'* or '*building'* (repeated 21 times) builds a picture of a severe lack of capacity in the Lao education system. Reification of the words and phrases asserted capacity development as a thing in its own right, rather than a loose conglomeration of professional development activities. It provides a circular argument- capacity development is needed because capacity is lacking. In consequence, external technical assistance is given a compensatory role.

The term '*capacity development'* is also used in a way which defines a power relationship between those who know and those who do not with the consequence that '*failure*' is located in the incapacity or unwillingness of individuals and groups, a circumstance which avoids the acknowledgement of the mismatch of proposed processes with existing understandings, contexts and systems.

Outcomes associated with the document

An immediate impact noted by inspection of this programme planning documents is that it leads to the employment and deployment of a high level of TA. I found that the sheer numbers of external consultants are perceived to place a burden on the small management teams assigned by MoE, as they need induction, logistical support and so on.

I have argued that generalised solutions are offered to be applied at field level without acknowledging or addressing the more difficult to change structural issues. An example (Section 5.2.4) is given in the suggestions for better education for ethnic minority groups which ignore the repressive attitude of the GoL to minority ethnic groups and the document repeats solutions are which have not been fully effective in the past.

In conclusion, the document reflects a simple model in which input is characterised as leading unerringly to the desired outputs. The document uses a technical register which implies education reform as a technological enterprise, which can be isolated from culture and expectation. It also builds on and extends an internationally and nationally promoted discourse of incapacity amongst teachers and education officials in a developing country. I, on the other hand, suggest that capacity is not lacking in Lao PDR but that, as in all times of change, specific targeted and clearly offered new knowledges are needed for effective reform.

9.1.3   Research question three: knowledges transmission

Research question three reflects on the ways knowledges are transmitted,
received and how they change practice:

> What is its relation between the transfer of the new knowledge/skills/information
> and change to schooling and how is the new knowledge/skills/information
> perceived by actors in education reform and their practice adjusted in the light of
> it?

Overview of the findings associated with research question three

In answering this question I looked at the ways knowledges transfer relates to
changed educational practice. Through the study I found that many existing
knowledges in the current education system are not deemed relevant to the
reform. This is of course inevitable, since any social act is a selection of
possibilities, but the recognition impelled me to investigate what is regarded as
knowledges for education reform in Lao PDR and who has the power to define it.

My main finding in this area, from Chapter Seven, is that knowledges are located
in two groups of discourses of education reform in operation in Lao PDR, each
occupying its own space and with little overlap between them. One is epitomised
by ESWG and the policy documents it has generated. It is an aspirational
discourse, predicated on matching an international standard of education. It is
backed by the strong discourses of government (policy documents, Ministerial

speeches and so on) and donors (international aid discourse, donor policy and so on). The other discourse is a discourse of practice, associated with implementers, and based in what is perceived to be reasonable change within the existing limitation to resources. The first discourse is what we want to do; the second what we can do. I argued in Chapter Seven that the aspirational discourse as a social determinant has more power, because it is supported by a powerful hierarchy and it informs policy papers, government directives and even education law. The discourse of practice has less power, e.g. to define new practices, because it is backed by less authority and is refutable by a discourse of lack of capacity. My conclusion from this investigation is that strong emphasis by donor agencies on the aspirational discourse diverts attention from the discourses of practice, which, I would argue, have ultimately more power to bring about change in the short term and for this generation of children. In Chapter Two I noted Ferguson (1994) and Teamey (2005) each constructed a view which contrasted the 'idealised' nature of donor discourse to the social reality of implementers. My analysis confirms this gap, but I have avoided the words ideal and idealised, because what I saw was a watered down version of child-centred education based in an ideology of liberal democracy not robust enough to provide a basis for the intended change. I concluded that the '*new methods'* are validated by a discourse of authority (Foucault 1977) derived from national and international discourses of development and education. Donor aided education reform in Lao PDR has itself become an expert system, which itself validates what is knowledges for education reform, leaving little room for challenge or contrary perception, a situation aggravated by a lack of attention to the provision or tools or fora for joint

evaluation.

Cross-country borrowing

Research respondees at all levels of the education system perceive the impetus

for the new knowledges underpinning the reform as coming from outside,

although '*outside*' is constructed differently by different actors in education reform.

Actors variously see new knowledges proposed by TA experts, the MoE, ASEAN

and so on. Cross country borrowing (see Beech [2006], Rappeleye [2006] and

Philips and Schweisfurth [2003]) is a fact of life and there is little likelihood, and

little rationale for, the creation of a new set of education principles and practices

for Lao PDR. However, I through the study I confirmed that reform practice,

almost by default, leads to what Remenyi, McKay, and Hunt (2004: 4) (quoted

previously in Section 6.4.2), call a *'largely off the shelf model handed down by*

donors, which is, in a real sense, not negotiable'.

I suggest that reliance on international perspectives largely through delegation to

TA consultants worked together to limit flexibility and positively discourage the

search for alternative and more appropriate and possibly more radical solutions.

The role of technical assistance

The use of technical assistance as a major source of new knowledges was raised

as a major theme in discussions with the Ministry and donor agency officials,

where I discovered ambivalence over the use of outside expertise. While the use of TA is accepted as a part of the donors' requirement, their contribution was largely constructed in negative terms, both from donors or GoL. I confirmed through the study that TA consultants, themselves found the current contracting systems restricting the exercise of their professional skills, and by plans with proscribed actions, outcomes and timescales. A criticism offered by consultants lay in the expectation that if they delivered the right knowledge, well enough specific outcomes would occur which are unlikely to be achieved.

In interview with officials of the Ministry of Education a very clear view of what was wanted in a consultant emerged. It was based largely in the ability to establish good personal and working relationships with Lao people. This was summed up (Chapter Six) as *'people we can work with',* something for reasons of personality and/or short term involvement, they rarely found. Lao personnel in both Ministry and donor organisations placed stress on the interpersonal aspects of donor aid, with comments such as '*when we are looking at working with the Ministry too little attention is paid to the pride of people'* (Chapter Six), something almost entirely missing from interviews with international donor officials. I also noted that strategic knowledges are associated with officials at the higher levels of donor organisations and are privileged over the more personal and contextual knowledge of Lao officials. It seems to me both represent important aspects of successful development. I suggest that effective '*communicative competence'* is a fundamental skill and one not tested by current recruitment procedures and therefore not given sufficient value.

The study allowed me to stand outside my normal working role as consultant and to see a situation with which no party is satisfied. In this circumstance a detailed review of the use of TA consultants is in order, but I found no evidence of willingness to address change by donors or GoL.

Selection of knowledges

The contextual nature of knowledges was asserted by respondents to the study at by donor officials and at both central and field levels, largely linked to an assertion of '*the way we do things in Lao PDR*' and couched in terms that '*they*', which sometimes referred to TA and sometimes to central ministry high officials, do not understand our work. I concluded that a straight line approach between input and output is adopted not for reasons of best practice in education but because it facilitates contractual issues rather that furthering education understandings, and that it encourages input that can be measured, counted and so paid for. This confirms the findings of a TA respondent who saw the selection and transfer of knowledges relegated to second place behind implementing the plan and hitting targets. A strong implication is that the current donor contracting system should be thoroughly reviewed, with a view to more productive outputs.

Knowledges and ideology

I identified through the study that change, as experienced by the recipient, relates not only to the acquisition of new knowledges but demands changed ideology. A

view of the child as an agent in her own development has been built up over the years in western education systems and is also closely linked, in western thinking, to democracy, going back at least to Dewey (1916). Thus a teaching/learning ideology is offered for implementation in a very different society. Moreover, in a resource poor situation, it is diluted until it is becomes no more than series of activities. I do not argue against a more democratic society in Lao PDR, or that a more effective teaching/learning system would include greater participation by pupils. However the study has convinced me that, as a first step, for many teachers, a clearer focus on understanding and delivery of the three major curriculum strands with some basic classroom management skills, e.g. all children seeing the black board, would both support their identity and self esteem as teachers and allow children greater access to learning.

Foundational values

I saw that both donors and GoL drew on foundational values, what Lyotard (esp. 1984) has called the grand narratives, or meta-narratives. From the study I came to see being Lao and doing things the Lao way as a grand narrative, another is socialism, and yet another, the regional identity as a part of ASEAN. Donors' grand narratives include participation, democracy and ownership. Lyotard sees the danger of grand narratives as that they rely on reference to a pre-existing reality for justification rather than reflecting new realities needed in a changing situation. I suggest that in spite of the influence of the Paris Declaration, colonial imposition through foundational values (Said 1975) continues but more in indirect

ways, one of which is the unchallenged view that western ways are better than non-western ones.

In practice the discourse of education reform in Lao was underpinned by conflicting grand/meta-narratives that are not worked through and open discussion of them was avoided. I also saw that donor foreign policy (see Novelli 2009, Section 6.4.6) impacted with the effect that, because of Lao PDR's lack of strategic importance, it is not able to command sufficient donor funding to fulfil the agreed ESDF action plan.

Educational as a technical construct

I have argued that in the donor-supported education reform, education is constructed as a purely technical matter. However I became aware, through the study, that it is impossible to separate the technical from the affective, in this case, technical knowledges from cultural interpretation. I showed in Chapter Six that an apparently simple (to me) concept, '*a child of the village'* can be interpreted differently by people working with differing sets of pre-existing common sense assumptions, impacting on the ways new knowledges are received and understood. Also in Chapter Six I illustrated a clear misunderstanding of new knowledges, with the observation of a community who built a wall dividing two grades in a classroom to implement multigrade teaching. I have argued in this thesis, not that Lao people lack the capacity to understand, but that misinterpretation is more common in situations in which new methods are distant

from existing knowledges and bridging understandings are not prioritised.

A discourse of lack of capacity

The power of a discourse of lack of capacity was noted in all contexts of the study. I found the literature of development articulates capacity as a rare resource (for example Chambers 2007:30, Riddell 2008:207). I have argued that there are many negative attributes which can be ascribed to education in Lao PDR and the desire to change them under pins this study. However I feel that I have demonstrated through this study that a focus on deficit does not tell the whole story. A discourse of lack of capacity takes power from its articulation and re-articulation. Each articulation constructs it and adds to its power. Closely associated with a discourse of lack of capacity is the notion of absorptive capacity. In the study I have argued that absorptive capacity need not be seen as a fixed measure but take the view that any organisation has to attend to its absorptive capacity in order to support innovation as it is an inherent aspect of organisational development. Absorptive capacity is greatest when new knowledges are related and built on prior knowledges, a prime pedagogic principle in schools, usually expressed as '*starting where the learner is'.*

A deficit model

In Chapter Six I described the current approach as located in a '*deficit model'*, the main feature of which is to blame failure on characteristics of the person or

institution identified as inadequate. I have argued that the approach transfers responsibility for the failure of aid to the recipient and avoids attention to the inadequacies in planning and implementation of reform activities. Once a deficit model is established, existing strengths can be overlooked. In addition the spotlight, trained on the characteristic of individuals or institutions, avoids analysis of systems which may provoke failure. I would suggest that the notion is based in a premise that some societies, cultures or people are inherently less able to accept professional development than others, which I see as an equity issue.

In conclusion, I have argued that in poor societies, there is understandable pressure to change an education system in a short time by providing the short cuts of limited, decontextualized information, the employment and deployment of large numbers of T.A and offering new knowledges as truth. I came to see that the attempt to short cut development processes, in fact, by not creating sufficient positive change for children, results in waste of precious resources. There are important implications for international donor agencies. I suggest an urgency to review procedures for planning interventions, including the contractual conditions, which could cause a more country located approach to donor-supported interventions.

If TA consultants are to remain a part of a new scenario, they must have greater communicative competence. Underlying changed practices, there is a need to institute a greater level of honesty and openness in acknowledging the conditions of achievement (and better defining achievement) and acknowledging failure, with

greater attention paid to publication of lessons learned, from failure as well as success. A better informed basis of interventions is needed, possibly with increased donor budget for in-depth research studies.

9.1.4 Research question four: emancipation and agency

Research question four relates to agency:

> Do the revised practices of donor aided education reform as experienced by implementing actors lead to their emancipation and greater agency and what is the relationship between emancipated actors and greater achievement for the rural child?

Overview of findings in relation to research question four

My main finding in this area is that the taking of agency by government officials and teachers is fundamental to on-going education reform. In a low resourced society, the taking of agency, which I characterise by having the tools to allow '*going beyond the information given*' (Bruner 1973) is vital if schooling is to find continuous improvement. The perceptions I held at the beginning of the study are that existing interventions do not always support increased agency commensurate with the money and expertise expended have been confirmed.

Power of existing structures

Through the study I have come to see structure both as something external to individuals, in the form of political and cultural contexts, and knowledges, and as internalised attitudes and perceptions. The reform to education applies new structures in the form of management activities, decentralisation and new classroom techniques, but I argue pays little attention to existing knowledges. From observation of Lao classrooms, (Chapter Seven) I saw the power of existing assumptions of what a child is, what teaching and learning is and the relationship between teacher and child. This gives teachers a base from which to assert agency, but, because programme designers fail to pay sufficient attention to the power of these existing structures, teachers take agency largely by subverting rather than embracing new techniques or more often, by absorbing new techniques into existing practices and understandings, an example of which is the common practice of sitting children in groups, with the teacher maintaining the practice of teaching from the blackboard, to the backs of a quarter of the children. Relevant to the discussion is the insight that at least part of the failure to achieve the desired change to schools lies in the lack of recognition of the power of existing structures. In this way change is stabilised, but the level of impact is low.

Observations indicated that teachers selected and used new techniques which had minimal impact on their existing constructions of themselves as teachers. They put up paper decorations in the classroom and put children's pictures on the walls and they sat children in groups, but, in most classrooms, the basic

methodology of copying from the board, chanting the lessons and learning by heart remained.

Teachers, as knowledgeable professionals, showed signs of wanting to change. They respond as many professionals do when confronted with new things, that is with enthusiasm, they overlay the new knowledges on the old ones. New knowledges offer the possibility of empowerment only if the threat to social self-esteem and actors' understanding of themselves as competent in the ways they have worked hitherto is better understood and allowed for.

9.1.5 Research question five: theoretical stances and methodologies,

Question five reflects on the tools available for such a study and examines theoretical stances and methodologies adopted for the study:

> How do the theoretical stances and methodologies of the study, in particular discourse and critical theory. support the analysis of reform in a non western, developing country?

Overview

I discussed the selection and use of theory and methods of data collection in Chapter Eight. The main finding to be recorded here is that the hierarchical, knowledge poor, eastern, socialist society of Lao PDR presents a very different challenge from the contexts of western Europe where critical theories were

developed. Neither the Theory of Communicative Action nor the Theory of Structuration fully provided a model for the description and analysis of the discourses of donor-supported education reform in Lao PDR although I have relied heavily of the notions of structure and agency as means to reach understanding. Equally, the idea of research generating critical awareness in people does not offer a model which fully explains the relationship between research and practical change. However a critical approach based in Fairclough's construction of CDA has provided the basis of analysis, allowing the exploration of the production, maintenance and change in social relations and the power structures concerned in the practice of development aid.

Another area of reflection is the study's reliance on the thinking of a number of, often competing, theorists. Some, for example Foucault and Bourdieu, take a social constructionist, late modern perspective with stances largely compatible with critical theory. However to understand the values underlying education reform I also based my thinking on Lyotard's foundational values, a post modern perspective. This has led to the consideration of whether it is appropriate, useful or even possible to bring together a variety of perspectives in constructing a theoretical approach to the exploration of an aspect of development aid. The post development theorists, (especially Rahnema and Bawtree 1997) in analysing donor aided development, constructed it as a monolithic institution and instituted a single mode of analysis, basing their analysis in the early works of Foucault. A similar approach was adopted by Parfitt (2002), who based his analysis in a Derridian, post structuralism paradigm. I have addressed education reform as a

social construction, which, while a coherent area of study, is constituted of varying but related discourses which have constantly shifting parameters and boundaries, and I have seen them moving in response to new information, changes in ideologies and changes in power structures and relations. Therefore I argue that education reform can and should be addressed with all the tools at the analysts' command providing they are held together by a consistent perspective (in the case of this study, critical ethnography) and a consistent mode of analysis. The test is whether the tools of reflection have allowed detailed deliberation, extend understanding and have offered speculation on alternative courses of action.

9.2   Audiences and impact of the study

The discussion above on the relationship between research knowledge and change raises questions about the audience for the study and whose perception it will affect. The use of the English language, the mode of expression used in this thesis, and (from my perception) the relative inexperience of using research evidence of many people in Lao contexts, means that the study is unlikely to have impact on GoL or to be read by respondents. Permission to undertake the research was not associated with the requirement to report back by MoE and feedback of research findings was requested by only one donor official.

The expected audience therefore is interested members of the international development community, which is in line with the findings of the study that to challenge existing practices, reflection on reform as a whole system is valuable

and brings new insights. A realistic expectation is that the study, when in the public domain, adds to a pool of knowledge, which may encourage greater reflection by some of those connected with donor aid.

9.3   Generalisabilty of the findings

An associated issue for consideration is how far the findings and implications of the study are generalisable to donor aided education reform in countries with different cultural and political contexts. Lao PDR is determinedly socialist, a political stance which reinforces and is reinforced by cultural hierarchies of society. There are aspects of the study's findings that are specific to Lao PDR, and to Lao cultural and political contexts. However some findings are generalisable. The insights that constraints are located in many national and international contexts and levels, and that more attention should be paid to existing knowledges and ideologies are applicable in many contexts and, in particular, should be considered in situations in which donor aid is not bringing about change commensurate with input.

The discourse of lack of capacity is used widely and I regard it as a major obstacle to development in Lao PDR and other countries. It should be challenged throughout the development community, since it results the adoption of oversimplified, decontextualised solutions. I have also argued in this thesis that current policy and practice in capacity development activity for teachers is constrained by its location in a model of education based in a watered down

western philosophy. I know from experience that similar models are in use in donor-supported interventions in other developing countries.

Developers in countries other than socialist ones may also consider the whether there are significant differences between their and their local partners' foundational beliefs.

9.4 Final conclusions and implications

In this section I pull together the main overall and final conclusions with their implications.

I concluded that the adoption of an international view of good practice, lack of attention to competing ideologies and the construction of the Lao education system as incapable, come together to promote a view of educational change as something best addressed by the transmission of a series of new techniques and knowledges, reduced to a set of target skills and practices, an approach which overlooks existing skills and practices. From the study I concluded that there is a failure to create a bridge between the 'new methods' and existing practices and ideologies. The outcome is that positive change, commensurate with the money and expertise expended, is not achieved.

A discourse of lack of capacity permeates development aid and is to be found in the literature of development aid, the discourses of donor and government officials

and field level discourses. Development aid workers, from DAC members to field workers, should be aware of the damaging nature of this discourse and work to eradicate its common use.

Donors and government apparently collude in the implementation of aid to educational reform. While motivations may be good, e.g. to ensure aid access, collusion resulted in the avoidance of 'difficult' areas for both GoL and donor, resulting in a fuzzy, not clearly focussed development strategy.

The result of both the 'lack' discourse and collusion is the adoption of a simplified approach which offers purely technical, simplified solutions to areas, located in complex contexts.

The provision of communicative spaces, but with neglect of cultural views on dialogue, questioning etc. do not appear to promote greater inclusion. The implication of this finding is development of much greater understanding of existing rhetorical traditions in relation to participation.

I saw the developers ignoring or misunderstanding teacher agency and failure to predict how 'the new' will be incorporated/changed/treated by teachers in an agentic way. I saw a consistent ignoring of teachers' existing creativity, an example of which is their initiatives in using children's mother tongue. This is closely linked to the identification of the gap in understanding between the centre and the field. There is an apparent lack of awareness in donors and MoE about

teachers and children in Lao classrooms and how they construct their roles. This is an area deserving of greater investigation.

There is a need for a new approach to development aid to education reform in Lao PDR with a move away from the current output driven model, which relies on measurable outcomes and is delivered through a pre-existing perception of "good" education, and driven by the fear of losing money to corrupt practices. This may be predicated on a move from donor focus on the 'aspirational discourse' to a more practical discourse located in a clearer understanding of the existing situation and diagnosis of the need and strengths of officials and teachers. An approach to building new competencies which support recipients' identities as competent professionals is needed. The move away from the current out-put driven model presents an enormous challenge, not in its implementation, but in the challenge to existing entrenched discourses of development but it is of sufficient importance, I argue, to demand the attention of donor agencies.

This study of donor aid to education reform in a country as a totality, while incomplete, has brought insights into the way the different contexts respond and rub together which may not have gained in the inspection of just one context or level. Longer and more in depth studies may bring significant understandings which illuminate the conditions of improved processes of development aid.

9.5   Concluding remarks

My last reflections are promoted by a question asked in Chapter Eight. When working with teachers, I questioned whether I would be able to make the required level of change with the support they received. This allowed me to see that there is little significant difference between the needs of the teachers and administrators in Lao PDR and their counterparts in more developed countries. When faced with in depth change, all need sensitive and targeted information delivered in circumstances that allow new practices to be engaged with and adopted. The notion that '*they*' have different needs is dangerous and divisive and, in Lao PDR and other developing countries, results in the attempt to short cut the processes of change. While recognising the economic constraints, I maintain the argument with which I started the study that resources, however much or little, which do not bring about the required change are wasted.

The review of education reform in a small country has given a picture of an education system with many strengths but with the hold-ups and constraints which slow development aided reform .This in turn prevents some of the children of Lao PDR from receiving education which is as effective as they deserve. Many of the findings of this study have confirmed or extended existing findings recorded in the canon of development literature. However I feel that the study has also revealed some new information and insights about the real constraints to positive change in education in one country and I reiterate the need for speedy solutions, to ensure education brings life-time chances to this generation of rural children.

Annex One

QUESTIONS SUPPORTING SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A   Letter sent to donor officials

Valerie Emblen PhD Student,
University of Birmingham UK
Dated: Sept 2008

By email

To (Relevant Officer)

Dear .....,

This paper forms a request to undertake a meeting with you or a member of your staff to discuss issues related to my research, the subject of which is an investigation of donor-supported reform in education in Lao PDR. A paper is attached explaining the research, with a letter of introduction from School of Education, University of Birmingham UK.

The research is for academic purposes and is designed to bring about better understanding of the processes of educational reform supported by donor agencies. All discussions and comments are confidential and no individual or organisation will be named in documents or presentations.

This is an early stage on my study and I would like gain an overview of the practice of the reforms in education by drawing on your views of the success and constraints faced, the success new modes of communication such as ESWG and your overview of the ways forward. The interview should take about one hour.

I would be very grateful if you would allow me a meeting.

Yours Sincerely

Valerie Emblen

B   Notes sent to high level officials of the MoE, in both English and Lao

From Valerie Emblen
PhD Student,
University of Birmingham UK

Thank you for giving your time to talk to me for my study of education reform in Lao PDR. The research is for academic purposes and is designed to bring about better understanding of the processes of educational reform supported by donor agencies. All discussions and comments are confidential and no individuals or organisations will be named in any documents and presentations.

I have identified the following areas of discussion but they should not restrict the discussion as I am concerned to understand the MoE's position, and so I would be glad if you could offer your view of ideas, issues and concerns.

A paper is attached explaining the research, with a letter of introduction from the School of Education University of Birmingham. I would also ask that you permit the interview to be recorded to allow views to be accurately portrayed. The interview will take about one hour.

Proposed areas of discussion:
1   Communication between Government and donor officials
Are you satisfied with communication with donor officials?
 Is the ESWG effective in improving communication?
 Do you consider the process of policy development effective?

2   Effectiveness of training activities

How well are government officials prepared to implement the planned changes?

How effective is current capacity development activity?

How far do you think TA consultants have been effective and what other strategies would you consider to be effective?

What is your view of a good TA consultant?

3   Pace of and direction of the reforms

Are you satisfied with the pace and direction of education reform practices?

Do you think you will meet the planned objectives by 2015?

Do officials lower down the Ministry and in the field fully understand and implement the reforms appropriately and efficiently?

C   *Notes sent to implementing officials of the MoE, in both English and Lao*

From Valerie Emblen PhD Student,

University of Birmingham UK

Thank you for giving your time to talk to me for my study of education reform in Lao PDR. The research is for academic purposes and is designed to bring about better understanding of the processes of educational reform supported by donor agencies. All discussions and comments are confidential and no individuals or organisations will be named in any documents and presentations.

I have identified the following areas of discussion but they should not restrict the discussion. I am interested in your point of view so please bring up your own ideas, issues and concerns.

A paper is attached explaining the research, with a letter of introduction from the School of Education University of Birmingham UK. I would also ask that you permit the interview to be recorded to allow views to be accurately portrayed. The interview will take about one hour.

Area of discussion 1: New practices in education

What do you consider the main strengths of the new practices in education?

What are the main constraints you face in implementing new things?

How can you follow up the work in the field?

Do you think reform practices are successful in field implementation?

Area of discussion 2: Effectiveness of training activities

What training have you had for your role in the education reform? Has it been enough?

What areas of knowledge and skill would you like to strengthen?

Have you worked directly with international donors or TA? Have you found their input useful?

Are international personnel easy to work with?

What would you want to say to them to make the collaboration more effective?

What is your view of a good TA consultant?

Area of discussion 3: Pace of change and suitability to Lao PDR

Do you think you will meet the planned objectives by 2015? If not what factors are providing constraints and obstacles?

How far do you think the reforms are adapted to the Lao context? Do you think the donors and TA really understand the Lao context?

D   *Notes sent to field and school officials in Lao*

Valerie Emblen PhD Student,
University of Birmingham UK

Thank you for giving your time to talk to me for my study of education reform in Lao PDR. The research is for academic purposes and is designed to bring about better understanding of the processes of educational reform supported by donor agencies. All discussions and comments are confidential and no individuals or organisations will be named.

I have identified some relevant areas I would like to discuss but they should not restrict the discussion. Please free to raise any issues you wish. I would also ask that you permit

the interview to be recorded to allow your views to be accurately portrayed.

The interview will take about one hour.

Area of discussion 1: knowledge of changes brought about by the new reforms

What do you know about the reforms in education going on in Lao? Can you tell me the main changes you have seen so far? What changes do you expect in the future?

Are there any things you find difficult to implement in your district or school or classroom?

How do you find out about policy changes from the MoE?

Do you have a chance to discuss the new ideas in schooling? Who do you discuss them with?

What major changes would you like to see for the children in your schools?

Area of discussion: Suitability of training

Have you personally undertaken any training courses because of the reform? In what ways have they helped to develop your professional practice? Are courses in sufficient depth and do they cover the right subjects?

What do you want to say to the people who organise training about what you need?

3 Area of discussion: Suitability of reforms to Lao PDR

Are the new practices suitable to Lao PDR?

Do you think the people who support education reform have a real understanding the Lao situation?

Do you see any changes in the children? Do they behave differently? Have parents told you how they feel about the changes?

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