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DATA MUST SPEAK

Exploring school climate in Lao schools

Positive deviance research in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic

Key findings



Most principals and teachers reported a **supportive working environment and good collaboration** among teachers, but principals also reported work-related stress.



Students in most schools said they loved being at school and felt safe there.



However, students also reported **frequent instances of bullying and violence between students, and conflicts with teachers, including physical punishment.**



School climate challenges are more prevalent in larger, urban schools and boys are more likely than girls to be punished by teachers.



Many students reported **poor classroom discipline** and considered this a critical obstacle to their effective learning.

Context

Although the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has made steady progress in expanding access to primary and lower secondary education, many children still finish primary school unable to read, write or do simple calculations. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, learning outcomes were low, with 50 per cent of Lao grade 5 students scoring in the lowest achievement band in the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) regional assessment.¹ Despite this learning crisis, some schools are outperforming others, even in the most disadvantaged areas. The Data Must Speak (DMS) positive deviance research aims to identify these 'positive deviant' or 'highly effective'² schools and examine their practices and behaviours. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from school principals, teachers, students and parents at positive deviant and comparison schools to identify their behaviours and practices. In addition, Village Education Development Committee members and District Education and Sports Bureaux staff were also surveyed.³

This brief presents key findings on the school climate in Lao schools.



Research findings⁴

Although students, teachers and school principals generally reported a positive school climate in many respects, students also mentioned very serious school violence problems.

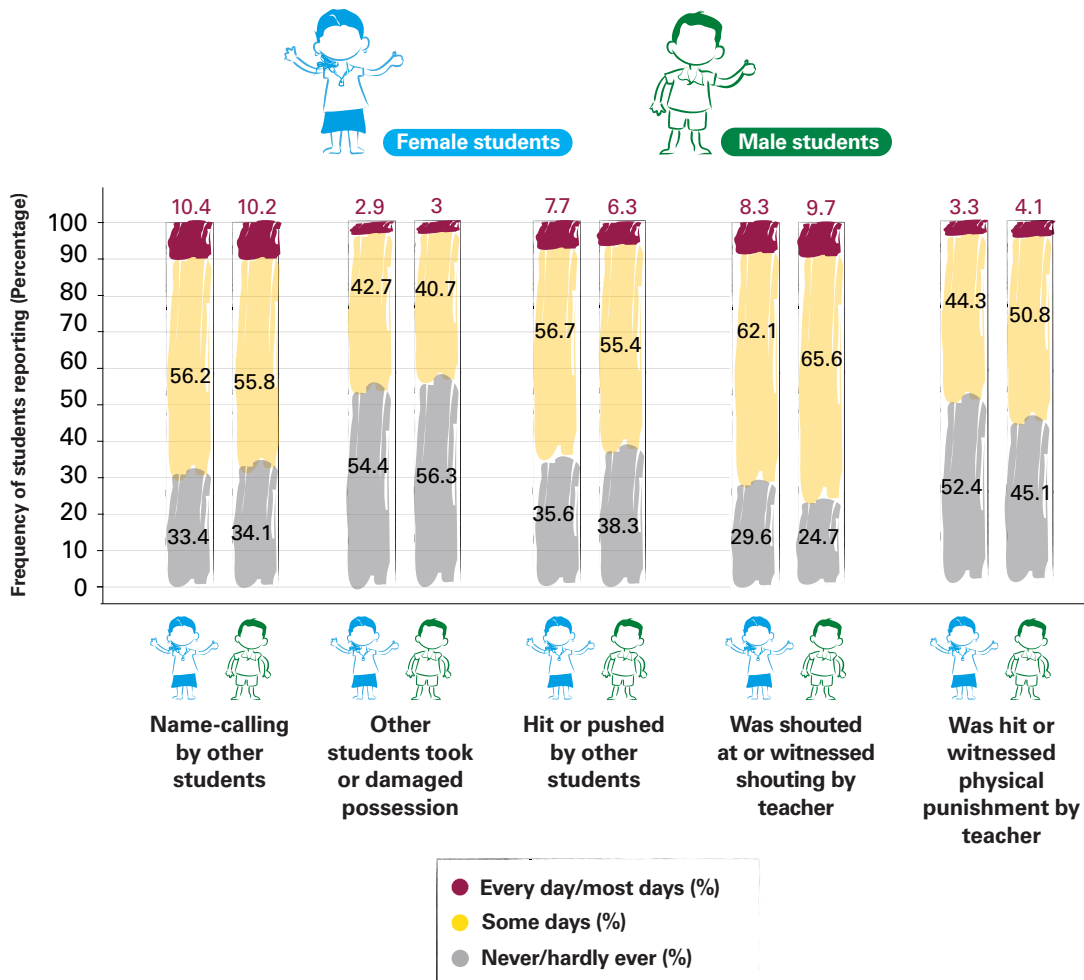
Most principals and teachers reported a supportive working environment and good collaboration among teachers, but principals also reported work-related stress. Nearly all principals and teachers surveyed agreed that they were satisfied with their jobs. Slightly more than 8 in 10 principals reported that they enjoyed working in their school and would recommend it. In the qualitative interviews, principals and teachers also reported generally positive views on principal-teacher relationships, with examples of how principals support teachers, including through classroom observations followed by feedback sessions, regular meetings and peer-learning activities. Teachers emphasized that they turned to principals if they had any questions about implementing the new curriculum or content and pedagogy. Teachers also reported good relationships and collaboration between teachers. However, roughly 40 per cent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that their job negatively affected their mental or physical health, and nearly 7 in 10 reported that they experienced stress in their work.

- 1 United Nations Children's Fund and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report: Children's learning in 6 Southeast Asian countries, UNICEF and SEAMEO, Bangkok, 2020, <www.unicef.org/eap/media/7356/file/SEA-PLM%202019%20Main%20Regional%20Report.pdf>.
- 2 Highly effective schools are performing better in terms of student learning than other schools with similar characteristics, as measured through SEA-PLM and Department of Education Quality Assurance data.
- 3 More detailed information about the sampling methodology can be found in the [full report](#).
- 4 Findings presented in this brief illustrate results across both positive deviant and control schools, since data analysis revealed similar insights into school culture across both school categories.

Ninety-eight per cent of students strongly agreed that they loved being at school and 88 per cent strongly agreed that they felt safe at school. In addition to their positive views about their school experience, students were also positive about their teachers. A total of 9 in 10 students strongly agreed that their teachers believed student well-being was important, and the same proportion agreed or strongly agreed that teachers treated them fairly. In focus group discussions, students often mentioned their motivation to learn and become more knowledgeable as an underlying factor for why they liked being at school. They also reported generally good relationships with their teachers, classmates and principals.

However, students reported frequent instances of bullying and violence between students and conflict with teachers, including physical punishment. Despite the aforementioned positive views, during group discussions students provided multiple examples of heavy fighting among students and bullying and teasing by other children. Roughly half of students surveyed reported that other students called them names, took their belongings and hit or pushed them on some days. Almost half of students reported that their teachers used physical punishment on some days, with nearly 4 per cent indicating that this happened more regularly. Moreover, nearly two thirds of students reported that teachers shouted at them or other students on some days and 8 per cent indicated this happened even more frequently (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Frequency of students reporting school climate problems by student gender



Source: Department of Education Quality Assurance, 2020/21.

A large body of literature supports that school violence negatively impacts “the physical and mental well-being of learners, their ability to learn and their educational outcomes. Victims and witnesses of school violence are more likely to miss school, have lower grades and/or drop out of school entirely. School violence also contributes to their lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.”⁵ The global literature also emphasizes that schools that take students’ well-being seriously are more likely to improve their academic achievements.⁶ International and regional large-scale assessment data suggest that ending violence in schools could result in aggregate learning gains of about 2 per cent compared with baseline values.⁷

School climate challenges are more prevalent in larger, urban schools and boys are more likely than girls to be punished by teachers. Based on the quantitative data collected, bullying and corporal punishment averages are higher in urban and larger schools. Boys are more likely to report being punished by teachers, but student bullying averages are not significantly different by student gender. The student-student bullying and student-teacher violence indicators are also not associated with ethnicity, teacher gender or other student and/or teacher characteristics.

Across schools, many students also reported poor classroom discipline and considered this a critical obstacle to their effective learning. They spoke about a lack of effective measures taken by schools to ensure environments conducive to studying and noisy and poorly behaved classmates disturbing their learning. However, some principals and teachers were said to use different methods to prevent and punish such behaviour, including scolding and warning students, speaking with their parents, asking them to do physical activities and using physical punishment.

Policy recommendations



Continue monitoring student well-being through the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and promote the use of these data for planning. The midterm review of the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021–2025 should explore the possibility of including a student well-being indicator in its Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.



Consider measures that may improve the school climate by reducing issues of school-based violence and classroom discipline. For example, introduce the social and emotional learning approaches in schools, which have been shown to support students’ academic results⁸ and reduce bullying and violence in schools and communities.⁹ If such an approach were selected, Teacher Training Colleges, Provincial Education and Sports Services/District Education and Sports Bureaux, Village Education Development Committees, school principals and teachers would need support to implement it.

⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization International Institute for Educational Planning, ‘The Psychosocial School Environment’, IIEP Learning Portal, UNESCO, Paris, 2021, <<https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/issue-briefs/improve-learning/the-psychosocial-school-environment>>, accessed 18 April 2023.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Office Bangkok and Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific, ‘Promoting Learner Happiness and Well-being’, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Education Thematic Brief, UNESCO, Bangkok, 2017, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248948.locale=en>>.

⁹ Wodon, Q., et al., Ending Violence in Schools: An investment case, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2021, <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/be641349-d30c-5624-81df-9eacb753daea>>.

¹⁰ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, An Initial Guide to Leveraging the Power of Social and Emotional Learning, CASEL, Chicago, 2020, <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL_Leveraging-SEL-as-You-Prepare-to-Reopen-and-Renew.pdf>.

¹¹ Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, INEE Background Paper on Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning for Children and Youth in Emergency Settings, INEE, New York, 2016, <<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/inee-background-paper-psychosocial-support-and-social-and-emotional-learning-children-and/>>.

About the Data Must Speak positive deviance research

The **DMS research on positive deviant schools** in Lao PDR was developed jointly by the Ministry of Education and Sports, local education partners, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Lao PDR country office, and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. This global research is being implemented in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is co-funded by the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) programme of the Global Partnership for Education/International Development Research Centre, the Hewlett Foundation, the Jacobs Foundation, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Schools2030 programme (led by the Aga Khan Foundation) and UNICEF internal resources, including UNICEF Lao PDR's efforts under the European Union-funded Partnership for Strengthening the Education System.

Series of policy briefs

This brief is the third in a series of documents produced as part of the DMS research in Lao PDR. It presents key findings from Stage 3 of this research, exploring practices and behaviours at positive deviant schools. The **first policy brief** focuses on teachers' capacity and the **second policy brief** examines the characteristics and practices of school principals. This series aims to inform policy dialogue and decision-making in Lao PDR and other countries interested in improving student learning outcomes. To access the full report, click [here](#).

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